



Holy Family School of Faith

Prayer and Spirituality

Prayer and Spirituality

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Lesson 1: The Life Of Prayer

Prayer Defined By The Saints

What is prayer? What is its purpose? St. Theresa of Avila says, “Prayer is to realize how much it means to you to have God’s friendship and how much He loves you.” She also says that prayer is when we raise our hearts and minds to God.

St. Therese of Lisieux offers this beautiful explanation about prayer: “For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look, turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.”

Stages Of Prayer

The life of Prayer has been divided into various stages by ancient Christian spiritual writers. By stages, these writers mean ‘stages of growth,’ or ‘stages of development,’ whereby, under the action of the Holy Spirit, the soul experiences and progresses in this fashion:

- 1.) Vocal Prayer
- 2.) Meditation
- 3.) Affective Prayer
- 4.) Prayer of Simplicity
- 5.) Infused Contemplation
- 6.) Prayer of Quiet
- 7.) Prayer of Union
- 8.) Prayer of Conforming Union
- 9.) Prayer of Transforming Union

These Stages can be further simplified into three categories based on the action of the Holy Spirit on the soul: vocal prayer, meditation, and contemplation. Let’s explore these three areas, and see how and which stages fit into these three larger categories.

Vocal Prayer

This is the kind of prayer we use when we speak out loud (or in our hearts) reciting either memorized prayers or spontaneous sentiments spoken throughout the day. Examples of this kind of prayer are the Our Father, Hail Mary, The Mass, Liturgy of the Hours, Rosary, litanies, Way of the Cross, or Divine Mercy chaplet.

Honestly, there is not a big difference between this kind of prayer and meditation, for, as St. Theresa of Avila points out, for any prayer to be prayer, it must be recited with devotion. Vocal prayers recited with great devotion means that the one engaged in prayer is offering the prayer with heart and mind present to the Lord, with the aim of being with Him with great love. Hence, the Rosary (as well as others of these prayers) is a kind of “cross-over” prayer, being both an example of vocal prayer and meditation.

Vocal prayer will always be a staple of our spiritual diet. It has the advantage of allowing for a group of people or community of praying together.

Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi: This is an old Latin phrase which means, “The law of prayer is the law of belief.” A more loose and colloquial translation may be, “Our faith is contained in our prayers.” Hence, vocal prayers have always been an essential part of learning and passing on the faith, especially to those who have not yet learned to read.

Meditation

Just as you and I get to know people by meeting, listening and speaking to them, so in meditation we get to know God by conversing with Him in a quiet place. “When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father in the secret place.” (Mt 6:6)

We listen to God speaking to us through the beauties of nature, Sacred Scripture, the texts of the Liturgy, the lives and writings of the saints. In meditation, we ponder what Jesus says to us in all of these ways and then we respond with our inner thoughts, applications, and words. It is a mental conversation between two friends.

Meditative prayer involves using all of the faculties of our mind: readings, imagination, drawing conclusions, carrying forth conversations with God, even using logic as applied to the mysteries of God so as to penetrate and possess them. In so doing, we allow ourselves to be penetrated and possessed by God.

A Key Principle to Mental Prayer (Meditation):

What matters in prayer is not what we do, but what God does to us and in us during these moments. It is our way of opening our hearts and minds to be in communion with the Living God. When we experience communion with the Living God, we are changed!

A Simple Method of Meditation:

- ❖ Turn your attention to God. *Ask* the Holy Spirit for help in prayer. Begin to read the Bible or some other book of meditation.
- ❖ As soon as something strikes you, *stop!* The goal is not to finish the reading but rather to be attentive to the promptings and inspirations of God. This is the food and drink of the soul.
- ❖ *Reflect* or think about what struck you as long as it keeps your attention (talk to God about it) and listen to Him.
- ❖ *Love God* for the point upon which you are meditating. This is the true goal of meditation—to purify our desires, that we desire and love God alone!
- ❖ Before you conclude make a concrete *resolution* that will let you live more like Christ today.
- ❖ Try to *remember* the meditation all day and, even more, resolve to live the meditation all day. Ask yourself: how am I to live out this meditation over the next 24 hours? Then choose some practical, precise, and concrete action to live out.

Examples of a resolution:

Today, I will listen more than I speak.

I will not gossip today, but, instead, use my tongue for praise of God and others.

I will not complain today, but will thank God for my many blessings each time that I am tempted to complain.

When I feel anxious today about something, I will replace that feeling with the thought that God will take care of me.

If I am in the midst of suffering, I will remember that God allows this suffering for my good and the good of others, and that there is meaning and purpose to the suffering.

Advice from the Saints:

“The most important thing of all is that you cling firmly to the resolutions you have taken in meditation so as to practice them carefully. That is the great fruit of meditation, without which it is often not only useless but harmful. *Why so?* Because the virtues upon which we have meditated but not practiced sometime puffs us up so much in mind and heart that we think we are already what we are resolved to be, which no doubt is the case if our resolutions are solid and ardent. But when, on the contrary, they are not practiced, they are useless and dangerous.” (Introduction to the Devout Life, II Chpt. 8)

Lectio Divina:

“Divine Reading” is the reading of Scripture in the context of prayer.

Guigo the Carthusian, 1083-1136, a Carthusian monk who formally outlined the classic method of Lectio Divina in a work called the *Ladder of Monks*. He described simple steps for praying with Sacred Scripture.

The Steps:

Lectio- read and reread a Scripture passage. According to Pope Benedict XVI, lectio “consists in pouring over the biblical text for some time, reading it and rereading it, as it were, ruminating on it as the Fathers say, and squeezing from it, so to speak, all its juice, so that it may nourish meditation.”

Meditatio- Reflect or think about the things that struck you in the reading.

Oratio- Speak with God about these things as you apply them to your life.

Contemplatio- is a simplification of prayer or a passage from active to passive or infused prayer.

Operatio- For the careful cultivation of lectio to truly bear fruit that lasts, it must result in a life of virtue.

Therefore, we end our meditation by choosing a practical concrete resolution or virtue to keep in mind and live throughout the day.

Suggested Meditation Material:

The Bible, especially the Psalms and the Gospels; the Magnificat; In Conversation with God; Divine Intimacy; the Office of Readings; books by Fr. Jacques Philippe; lives and writings of the saints.

Lesson 2: The Stages Of Prayer

Contemplation is a real awareness of God, desiring and loving Him, which we do not produce but simply receive from Him when we are ready for it.

In contemplative prayer we drink from the divine river of delight: They shall be inebriated with the richness of thy house and you shall give them to drink from the torrent of thy pleasure Ps 36:8 vulgate

It is a gift from God, which is given to the person

- who has persevered in daily meditation,
- the rooting out sinful habits
- and is striving to live a more generous life of virtue.

The essential characteristic of this gift is that

- it transforms prayer once dominated by human effort
- into prayer dominated by God's action.

God infuses this prayer into one's soul as a gift

- No human effort can produce infused prayer

The difference between meditation and contemplation

- that of rowing a boat and sailing.

Regardless of the starting point of one's prayer life

- the Lord wants to lead all souls to contemplation.

Stages Or Grades Of Prayer

We have already mentioned vocal prayer, meditation (to which we will constantly return) and contemplation. Let us break up some of these general kinds of prayer into more specific categories, categories spiritual writers refer to as the Stages of Grades of Prayer. "Make of yourself a capacity, and I will make of myself a torrent!" Jesus in a mystical vision to Blessed Angela of Foligno.

Affective Prayer:

St. Frances De Sales identified this grade of prayer. The focus is more on a simplified meditation where the operation of the will predominates over the intellect. Loving God precedes thinking. The mind may even find itself in distractions yet not lose this repose with God. (Note: this does not mean that when the soul discovers this distraction that it should not remedy it soon. See below for How to Deal with Distractions.)

Acquired Recollection:

Some spiritual writers call this the level of natural contemplation. The person praying is still largely the actor here, (as opposed to contemplation, when the Holy Spirit takes over and the soul is passive.) The person experiences a deep posture of repose, meaning that all of one's interior faculties are directed toward a loving gaze without the need for words. The will is filled with affection for God. This is the last stage or grade experienced before contemplation.

Passive Purgation of the Senses:

This is an infused experience, meaning it is an experience not attributable to human power. It is completely supernatural. It is a gift from God with the aim of purifying the soul from disordered attachments to sensual things. As fallen humans, when we like something, our desire for it often times becomes excessive or disordered. We may not even realize it. We therefore cling to this good, whatever it may be, to the detriment of being able to serve God deeper. This is why the Holy Spirit purifies the soul at this point. Only He sees when the soul is ready for this.

Characteristics-

- ❖ Period of prolonged dryness in prayer, much more intense and difficult than typical dry periods that all souls experience along their heavenly journey, usually due to mediocrity. This period lasts much longer. It is given by the Holy Spirit.
- ❖ God tests the soul's willingness to persevere.
- ❖ The soul may also experience an inability to meditate.
- ❖ It is very possible to withdraw from this phase willfully, preferring consolations. This is a very grave danger, and will prevent the soul from progressing.
- ❖ Temptations toward adolescent sins are represented.
- ❖ The soul knows that this experience is not self-generated.
- ❖ This phase is accompanied with a keen desire to serve God.
- ❖ Trust God, and know that this is His doing for one's own benefit.
- ❖ This phase is the bridge leading into true contemplative prayer.

Infused Contemplation:

This is the grade of prayer that is the result of the Holy Spirit's action in our soul. The soul is more passive than active. The soul experiences a new, infused knowledge of God based on the operations of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. Now that the Holy Spirit is active in the soul, He begins to perfect the virtue of Charity with the Gift of Wisdom. The experience of God in the phase is supernatural. St. John of the Cross refers to it as the "invasion of the soul by the supernatural." It is impossible to reproduce this experience based on one's own efforts. The soul is more passive than active, as was stated before.

The Divine insights now granted by God are not ordered, and may therefore be confusing. The experiences in contemplation are thus indescribable, so spiritual writers often use metaphor. Yet, the soul has full security that it is under the action of God, enjoying moral certainty that the soul is in a state of grace. There is a renewed impulse for growing and practicing virtue.

Prayer of Quiet:

At this stage, the awareness of God's presence captivates the will, although the intellect remains free. Because of this, the soul and body can experience a burning delight. The will is captivated and absorbed in the presence of God. The soul feels wearied by speaking. St. John of the Cross refers to these experiences as "inebriations of love."

Passive Purgation of the Spirit, or Dark Night of the Soul:

Called the Third Conversion. Consists of purgations that are extremely painful. It completes what was done in the Dark Night of the Senses. Defects like involuntary distractions in prayer, dullness, moments of impatience, excessive zeal and penances, etc., are perfected. Humility reigns supreme over pride, which receives its final death blow. Imagination and memory are perfected. This is the bridge for entering into the Unitive phases.

Prayer of Union:

This is considered by St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa of Avila a process of perfection, not necessarily a distinct category. This union is a mystical prayer where the internal faculties are captivated and occupied by God's presence. The intellect, will, memory and imagination are all captivated by God's supernatural presence. All that's left is the bodily sensations. There is an absence of distraction because the memory and imagination are absorbed by God. There is complete certitude of the intimate union with God. Writers also mention an absence of weariness or tedium that can sometimes accompany other grades of prayer. St. John of the Cross refers to these experiences as a "fiery dart of Divine Love."

Prayer of Conforming Union:

This differs with the previous phase of prayer in that here, even external senses are absorbed. The soul may become sensibly impervious to his/her surroundings. The prevailing desire is toward finishing the transforming union. There is also a longing for the beatific vision. The soul frequently experiences ecstasies here, meaning out of body experiences as God draws the operations of the soul more and more within the realm of His own power. Thus, this is a by-product of the operations of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, which now operate without resistance in the will.

Transforming Union:

“Nothing less than a transformation into God.” St. John of the Cross. This is a stage more divine than human. This is the most intimate participation with God that the soul can have this side of death. This is more fully the communication of union between God and the soul. There is a complete forgetfulness of self, combined with a great desire to suffer. Weakness of the body is replaced with greater strength; thus, there is the absence of ecstasies. The body itself experiences the transforming power of God.

How To Deal With Distractions

A most common difficulty in prayer is distractions.

It is normal to be distracted,

- we should not be surprised or discouraged over this.

When our mind wanders off, simply, peacefully and gently bring your attention back to God.

- Go back to the point that struck you
- Or move on and read to another point that hits you

Even if we were to spend an entire prayer period bringing our distracted attention constantly back to God it would not matter. That prayer is undoubtedly very pleasing to God!

- It is wrong to think we can achieve absolute concentration for the entire duration of prayer.
- Distractions do not prevent God from doing His work in your soul!
 - Keep a notepad with you
 - Practice abandonment and trust
 - 1 Peter 5:7 (God will manage these things for you)
 - Jesus to Catherine of Sienna: “I am he who is; You are she who is not.”

Some Tips For Building The Habit Of Daily Meditation

If possible try to pick a specific time to pray each day and stick to it.

- Generalities are useless.

When should we pray?

- Early in the morning or later afternoon
- If you leave it to the end, the devil will set traps

Where should we pray?

- Matthew 6
Go into your room, shut the door, and speak to your Father in secret
- Solitude and Silence
- Create a special place at Home
- Best place in the Presence of the Eucharist

How long should we pray?

- How much time is necessary for an intimate loving conversation?
- Don't leave off too soon

The Rosary is most helpful in establishing the habit

- It is vocal prayer and meditation with the help of Mary – at the school of Mary

JPII Rosarium 15

The Rosary mystically transports us to Mary's side as she is busy watching over the human growth of Christ in the home of Nazareth. This enables her to train us and to mold us with the same care, until Christ is "fully formed" in us (cf. *Gal* 4:19).

Read, Reflect, Resolution

Lesson 3: The Role Of The Sacraments In The Interior Life

The Spiritual Doctors of the Church offer us a simple way of understanding the steps along our path to sanctity. In the previous lesson, we learned about the various stages or grades of prayer. This can be a helpful roadmap, albeit organic and fluid, not fixed and definite (which would be a mistaken assumption!). Let us now simplify these grades and examine our spiritual life in terms of personal conversion. By conversion, we mean when a heart discovers its true love in God Alone and begins to want Him and His will above its previous selfish pursuits. These latter pursuits no longer have the same attraction or influence on the soul after conversion. The following steps as given by the saints may be helpful:

Levels of Conversion: (these are the levels of progression as our hearts are turned more and more toward God)

- i. Break habit of serious sin. This first level means that the Christian is no longer trapped in habits of mortal and/or serious sin, but lives a new-found freedom.
- ii. Abhorrence of venial sin. Now, not only does the Christian cease sinning mortally, but begins to feel a strong aversion toward all sin so as not to offend our Beloved.
- iii. Habitual exhibition of heroic virtue. The Christian increases in virtues like humility and charity to such a degree as to exhibit them heroically and consistently, even habitually. No longer is he attracted to things of this world as he once was, but is now attracted strongly and firmly to the Will of God.

Hence, as we are drawn ever deeper into Christ, our desire to do the good and avoid that which is evil increases, to the point where doing good becomes easy, we do it promptly, and with greater joy! Hence, this is what is meant by enjoying a virtuous life.

How do we gain this deeper union with Christ? Based on our previous lessons, it is obvious that prayer is absolutely indispensable to this growth. Yet, there are other indispensable elements that need to be mentioned here. For, without these, even prayer itself would be impossible.

The Elements? Actual And Sanctifying Grace

Actual Grace:

This is a kind of divine or supernatural thrust or impetus that allows us to act above our own powers. This is because our own natural powers are incapable of attaining supernatural rewards. Prior to the reception of sanctifying grace, we need a special help from God, which is called Actual Grace. When we think or act in accordance to God's plan, to what is right, and when we restrain our steps from sin or falsity, this is God working in us and with us, in order that we may act. (cf. Council of Orange, Can. 9)

- There are *four functions* to Actual Grace—
To prepare the way for the first infusion of Sanctifying Grace, like when an adult decides to get baptized,
- To restore to the state of sanctifying grace, like when a mortally sinful Catholic decides to go to confession.
- To bring about the increase of sanctifying grace by activating the infused virtues (Faith, Hope, and Love) and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. For example, a light bulb has the capacity to give off light, but must first be turned on! We have these supernatural gifts given to us at Baptism, but they need actual grace in order to be activated.
Finally, it gives the soul the power to resist temptation.

Sanctifying Grace:

This is the free gift from God which actually infuses His life into our soul, but stays only through invitation. It is a free gift, unearned or deserved, and makes the Christian into the image of Christ. Thus, he or she is now able to merit and receive a reward for his or her Christ-like actions. "It is no longer I but Christ who lives in me." Gal 2:20 This gift heals, perfects, and elevates our human nature, allowing us to participate in the very essence of God. "...and become partakers of the divine nature." 2 Pet 1:4

- Its effects on the soul are as follows: We become adopted children of God.
- Heirs of His infinite promises.
- Our soul is made beautiful in His sight.
- We become Temples of God, Temples of the Holy Spirit.
- This grace is lost through mortal sin. This, in fact, is what makes the sin mortal; it kills this life of Grace, this life of God, who wishes to dwell in our soul, but only by invitation.

Merit:

It is important to grasp that sanctifying grace is a real transformation of the soul! Whereas Luther taught that the soul in grace is wearing the garment of Christ's merits, which cover his own like a cloak covers a leprous beggar, the Church teaches that the very substance of the soul is renewed; the soul is affected in its very being so that it can well be called a new creation. It has a new life in it, a life with its own new abilities, powers, and destiny, given to the soul by God. Thus, the baptized Christian can now perform actions at the level of its new being, actions which because they are supernatural, merit a supernatural reward. (cf. 2Cor 5:17; Titus 3:8; Eph 2:10.)

Merit is where God has attached supernatural value to given acts. He offers man a reward in the order of grace, not in the order of nature. This means that it is not earned naturally, nor is it a 'this for that.' There is no equivalent between the action and the reward. It is His divine generosity attached to the given act that gives it its value. It's His pure gift, done to enable His adopted children to really live as sons and daughters of God; to accommodate us to life in His divine kingdom. Thus, we are not saying that man, on his own can establish a RIGHT toward God or toward heaven. Rather, He offers us grace to perform divine or Christ-like actions, which then are deemed meritorious and supernaturally valuable because of their Christ-likeness, and are thus rewardable and valuable to God.

As St. Augustine was fond of saying, it takes grace to get grace!

Thus, we see that the grace in our soul is a result of the indwelling Trinity. It is God's action in our souls. Yet, it is also about the soul's reaction to God's action! The intellect has the new powers of faith, the will new powers of hope and charity.

We have already used the example of a light bulb when we discussed Actual Grace. Let us continue that analogy with regard to Sanctifying Grace. Our soul is like the filament wire in a light bulb: when the bulb is not turned on, we can see the wire. When the switch is flipped, now we see nothing but light, as if the filament wire is gone. It is still there, but is now luminous, and this brilliance hides the wire for the light!

Source Of Grace

Now that we see the beauty, necessity, and function of both Sanctifying and Actual Grace in our souls, the question remains: how does the Christian receive this grace? The answer is that we receive Actual grace as a constant gift and opportunity of the Holy Spirit active in the world. We receive Sanctifying grace primarily (though not solely) through the Sacraments. The Sacraments were directly instituted by Christ as the principal means of conveying *His divine life to the soul*, which is what we mean by the word *grace*.

As important as all of the sacraments are, I refer you to Faith Foundations II for a good catechesis on all seven. For our purposes here, I would like to limit our discussion to the central holy Sacrament, around which all of the others are organized—the Eucharist!

The Church teaches that in order to benefit from the grace of this Sacrament, we must first be in a state of grace, meaning, not having committed a mortal sin without first receiving sacramental absolution in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, (also called Confession or Penance.) The reason for this should be obvious: we do not try to give life saving medicine and nutrition to a corpse. First, the corpse must be returned to life. Only then can he benefit from food and medicine. So, too, the Christian who commits a mortal sin: if a Christian suspects that he or she is not in a state of grace, he should first receive absolution in the Sacrament of Reconciliation before receiving communion. To receive communion without first going to confession would not only be of no avail to the soul in mortal sin, but would also further compound the sin because to receive Jesus in this way is also considered a sacrilege. (See 1 Corinthians, 11:27-30.)

More will be said about the Sacrament of Reconciliation in Lesson 9.

Worthy Reception:

Thus, if we as Christians would only open our hearts to Jesus in the Eucharist, we would be able to experience with the Psalmist a new development in our spiritual ability to “taste and see the goodness of the Lord!” As we discover His goodness, we will only want Him more!

Frequent holy reception of the Eucharist is therefore highly, highly recommended by the saints. Each time we receive Him, He receives us, transforming us more and more into His Image and Likeness. “We also know that the Son of God has come and has given us discernment to know the one who is true. And we are *in* the one who is true, *in* His son Jesus Christ.” (1 Jn 5: 20) [emphasis mine.]

But how do we receive communion in a holy manner? Aside from being in a state of grace, there are some practical steps to be taken in order to benefit the most from this solemn encounter:

- i. Pay close attention to the readings during the Liturgy of the Word. If possible, meditate on these readings before going to Mass. Let the sacred word seep deep in your soul. Ask the Holy Spirit to unlock the meaning for you. Ponder it, like the holy man in Psalm 1, whose “delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.” (Psalm 1:2.) This is how our soul will become like His, planted near streams of running water, allowing us to yield good fruit in due season and to prosper on all that we do.

- ii. We have already spent time in the previous chapters explaining and extolling the necessity and great benefit of mental prayer every day. Suffice it to say that in order to really experience the life-transforming power of Christ in the Eucharist, daily meditation is indispensable and essential!
- iii. After receiving communion, at the conclusion of Holy Mass, spend time thanking the Lord in silence. Eucharist, in fact, means ‘thanksgiving’ in Greek. And for what shall we thank Him?
 - a. For the gift of Divine Life and adoption as divine sons and daughters.
 - b. For our own natural life, and all of the love we receive.
 - c. For the communion we share with His Blessed Mother and ours, as well as communion with all of the saints.
 - d. For healing that is right now taking place in our souls, as the old Adam and Eve are being transformed into the new, into Christ and Our Lady.
 - e. For strength to resist temptation and to grow in the virtues.
 - f. For anything and everything else that is good that you can think of.
 - g. We needn’t say anything, of course. We can sit and just be with Him; we can just be warmed by His divine rays, the way we do when we are in the sun on a warm day. The plant needs to do nothing in order to receive the nutrients of the sun. We just need to “be still, and know that He is God.”
- iv. Eucharistic Adoration is a practice that I have really seen blossom since I first started ministry 15 years ago. Nothing increases our faith more than to come before the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament and adore Him there, to see Him there, and to know that He hears and loves us. “Beloved, have this confidence in him that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in regard to whatever we ask, we know that what we have asked him for is ours.” (1 Jn 5:14)
- v. Spend time listening to God during Mass in the Liturgy of the Word and homily, during our Thanksgiving after Holy Mass, during our Holy Hours in front of the Blessed Sacrament, and throughout the day. Mother Theresa once stated that the fruit of silence is prayer. When we hear the Lord speaking through these means, through others, through the circumstances of our day, we will grow more attuned to hearing and responding to Him. This is how we know that He wills our happiness, and we will begin to experience it in new and profound ways, and will want more and more of it!

Hence, to have a Eucharistic spirituality is to take seriously the Divine Presence of the Lord in the Eucharist; to take seriously the salvific nature of Holy Mass, and the need to live out this sacrificial life ourselves. In lesson 7 we will spend some time on the necessity of mortification, but suffice it to say here that unless we become like the grain of wheat and die to ourselves, we will not have life within us. “He who seeks to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Mt 10:39)

We must discipline our inordinate desire for comfort and our excessive desire for even good things by simply practicing self-denial, either interiorly, like when we avoid thinking about ourselves, thinking negative thoughts, or not keeping custody of our heart and eyes to name three examples, or externally, like when we fast, or offer up something we have a perfect right to but deny ourselves use or access to it. In this way, we will be filled with the Spirit of God, which is opposed to the spirit of the flesh. (cf. Rom 8 and Gal 5)

Lesson 4: Mary And The Interior Life

We may track devotion to Mary through every century of the Church

- Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Augustine
- St. Ildephonse of Toledo (606-667)
- St. Bernard +1153
- Odo of Canterbury +1200

He who wants to receive this wisdom confides to Mary this desire of his and Mary will preoccupy herself with he who is to find Christ. In fact, one goes to Christ through Mary, one goes to the Son through the mother. By means of the Mother of Mercy one reaches Mercy itself.

- St. Louis de Montfort (1673-1716)
True Devotion to Mary
- John Paul II
Redemptoris Mater

All the Fathers, Doctors, Saints and spiritual writers indicate essentially the same thing:

- Their desire to belong totally to Mary
- as the means to belong totally to Jesus.
- To place oneself into the hands of Mary
- that she may lead us to a more perfect union and likeness with Christ.

Explain Devotion To Mary In Simple Terms

Devotion to Mary is

- to live in imitation of Jesus' relationship with Mary
- That we may become more like him

The Annunciation – Luke chapters 1 and 2

- Jesus entrusted himself entirely to Mary
- As an embryo in her womb
- As a little child in her care

John Paul II

Before anyone else it was God himself, the Eternal Father, who entrusted himself to the Virgin of Nazareth, giving her his own Son in the mystery of the Incarnation. (RM 39)

Mary cooperated with the Holy Spirit in

- the birth and development,
- education and formation of Jesus

With the Holy Spirit, Mary formed Jesus

Crucifixion – John 19:25-27

- Mary becomes the Mother of the Church

The self-emptying love of Christ poured out from the Cross is

- the source of the world's salvation.

Yet, at the Cross Jesus, the New Adam is not alone.

- Mary, the New Eve, persevered in union with Him,
- where she stood united perfectly to His self-emptying.

At the Cross

- Mary united her total self-emptying in trust to
- the redemptive love of Jesus for the life of the world.

Therefore, the life of grace that flows from the Cross is the fruit of **two loves**:

1. the all-sufficient redemptive love of Jesus
2. and the maternal love of Mary.

In this way Mary cooperated with Christ

- to give supernatural life to mankind,
- the same Life we receive in the sacraments.

Just as a woman cooperates with God to give natural life to a child and becomes a mother in the order of nature, likewise, at the Cross, Mary cooperated with God to give the divine life to all mankind. For this reason she has become our mother in the order of grace.

Jesus proclaimed this fact from the Cross

- Woman behold your son
- Behold your mother

John represents all disciples of Jesus

- At the Cross Jesus entrusts John to Mary
- John took her for his own mother (his spiritual mother)

At the Cross Jesus entrusted all of humanity to Mary in the person of John

- He extended the maternal role of Mary to all people
- Mary is our Mother in the Order of Grace

What does Mary do for us?

- What did Mary do for Jesus?
- That is what she does for us.

With the Holy Spirit Mary forms us in the likeness of Jesus

Mary acts as our spiritual mother in two key ways:

1. Interceding on our behalf with God
2. Disposing (influencing) us through her prayer to know and to do God's will that we may become like Jesus

Cana John 2:1-11

What should we do? The Church recommends that we:

- Entrust ourselves to Mary as Jesus did in the Incarnation
- Live in union with Mary as a little child with his mother
- Sit at the school of Mary each day in the Rosary
 - Begin meditation with a Hail Mary
 - Pray the Rosary each day

JPII Rosarium 15

The Rosary mystically transports us to Mary's side as she is busy watching over the human growth of Christ in the home of Nazareth. This enables her to train us and to mold us with the same care, until Christ is “fully formed” in us (cf. *Gal* 4:19).

God wants us to depend entirely on Him

- God does not do everything by himself
- Angels; Priests; Parents; Saints
- Each has as unique God given role

Lesson 5: Human Formation - Living Rightly, Living Well

The life of holiness is a life of balance. Further, it is a life for all humans, not just the priest, the monk, the nun, or the brother. We are all called to holiness—fathers, mothers, housewives, lawyers, doctors, businessmen, teachers, etc.

Yet, too often our view of a holy life is faulty. We too often times view holy people as people who spend all of their time *looking heavenwards*, hands clasped, *avoiding* all of the **fun** things that everyone else is doing. In other words, we think a holy person's life is a life spent **denying life** (as famous atheistic philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once claimed,) In such a light, holiness is seen as a life of **repression and guilt**. All of this is *false!*

With this false view, indulgence is viewed as the only viable alternative. Yet, this does not lead to happiness but to misery. What is the answer???

Because of the human propensity to cling to good things in a disordered way, which creates disorder in our lives, there is a time for *repression*, or at least self-denial, but this is not the end of the story. This is only an early stage on the path to holiness. The fact is, repressing urges is the result of our urges being fallen! It means we desire good things, but in a bad way, like robbing in order to eat, or lying in order to avoid trouble. We are, in fact, mysteriously attracted to evil. But this is a broken state, a state that produces tension in problems in our lives.

This state can be fixed, however! This is the Good News of Jesus Christ! We do not have to stay broken. How does He fix us? No doubt, by His grace, but it is by His grace working to *heal, perfect, and elevate* our nature, so that our fallen desires can be restored to desire not only what is good, and to do so in a way that is good! This is the role of **virtue**.

Goods

To understand virtue, let us first begin by understanding our motivations—what do we desire?

We human beings are complex creatures, and so we have different longings that we have to categorize in order to appreciate and understand.

Philosophers and theologians have identified roughly **8 DIFFERENT CATEGORIES** of goods for which we all desire and long. They are:

Goods related to **physical life** - nourishment, sexuality, health, sleep, safety (these all give us physical pleasures).

Goods related to **knowledge** - the satisfaction of curiosity.

Goods related to **enjoyment of beautiful things** (aesthetic appreciation) - meat lover's pizza, art, concerts, sports events, physical beauty, poetry

Goods related to some **achievement** - We all want to be good at something, we want to make a contribution, we don't want to be *just* appreciators, we also want to be makers, and doers.

There are also Good relationships that we pursue:

Good relationships between our internal faculties.

This is the good of ***inner peace***

- This good gives us mental and emotional stability
- Reason so many people go to psychiatrists, or yoga, is that they lack inner peace.

There's a good relationship between our inner life and our outer life.

Good of **self-identity**.

- This is what allows us to be honest, sincere, and let's us live according to our convictions.
- Makes our lives authentic, consistent.
- Without this good, we feel phony, fake
- This doesn't mean doing whatever we feel like; and it doesn't necessarily mean "being yourself"

Good relationship with **other human persons** - this is the good of Friendship.

- Includes married love
- Family relationships
- The love between all persons

Good relationship with **supernatural persons** - This is the good of Religion

These are the ultimate reasons that motivate all our actions. Regardless of what action we examine, if we keep asking, “why did I do that?” we’ll end up at one of these eight categories.

Even money or power is only desirable insofar as it can help us to gain one of these
So, we pursue these things because they make us happy

All evil, all sin comes from pursuing a good in an inappropriate way. Sometimes we pursue one type of good, and in doing so we attack another type of good. When we do that, we hurt ourselves and others.

Let’s look at some of the good, and see how they become evil:

Physical goods

- gluttony (pursue food till it damages health)
- fornication (pursue sexual gratification to the expense of the proper relationship between a man and a woman)

Good of Knowledge

- Desire to listen to gossip, or scandal
- Mania for knowing things that are degrading, or none of our business (e.g., celebrities’ personal lives)
- All of this knowledge impedes the proper development of other aspects of our lives

Good of Beauty

- Pornography (seeks to promote physical beauty at the expense of personal beauty)
- Immodesty in dress (same thing)
- Listening to Music or watching Movies with evil messages, foul images, sacrilegious themes (pursuit of beauty that involves an attack on truth, on personal relationships, on religious piety).

Good of Achievement

- Stepping on others who get in our way up the ladder (obviously, attacks the good of personal relationships)
- We all know people who, say, focus on achievement in their careers to the detriment of the other goods (beauty, friendships, psychological health, knowledge, etc...)

Good of inner peace

- Sometimes we only do what we feel like doing, because we don't want to feel conflicted about anything
- This, of course, will keep us from striving for those goods in our lives which are difficult to obtain.

Good of self-identity.

- We refuse to do what is right because “that’s just not who I am” or “That’s not me.”
- We say, “I can’t change who I am.”
- We use that as an excuse for ignoring the other goods that we should be working towards.
- Sometimes we must change ourselves in order to gain the goods which will fulfill us.

Good of personal relationships

- Often times we’ll do anything-no matter how sinful-to “fit in,” or “to get somebody to like us.”
 - We all do it; we criticize others, gossip, use foul language
 - For example, sometimes girls will agree to do impure things so that they can get the guys to like them.

Good of religion

- Certain forms of religion directly attack other goods:
 - For example, Puritanism rejects many forms of art and beauty
 - Some ancient religions had human sacrifice
 - Some religions practice ritual sexual perversion
 - And... some religions advocate hatred of those who don't belong to it.

To summarize, everything we do, every decision we make, every course of action we pursue: anytime we do anything, it is *for the sake of some good*. We pursue these goods because we know that they will make us happy. However, sometimes the *way* in which we pursue these goods is such as to actually hinder our own happiness and fulfillment. This is what causes us misery and degradation.

What we need, then, is a strategy for pursuing all of these goods in an integrated way, without causing any damage. If we can do this, we can become happy.

Grace, Virtue, And Balance:

This is where grace and virtue come in. We cannot do what is good and avoid what is evil without God's grace. We are fallen, and our desires inevitably and predictably lead us astray. Grace heals, perfects, and elevates these desires, as was stated before. But in order for that to happen, Christ places His grace in the depth of our heart, where it remains until we act on it and practice it via our free choices. In other words, in our repeated efforts of doing the virtuous thing rather than the evil, the grace of Christ slowly but surely heals, perfects, and elevates our desires and choices.

This is why our resolution after meditation is so important. When Jesus teaches His disciples to pray, fast, and alms-give in the sixth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, He is pointing out how our actions take on new life in Him, but only with frequent practice! (cf. Mt 6: 5-18.)

The life of grace and virtue is the only life befitting of Christians, how they wish to be happy in this life and the next. It is, in fact, the blueprint for happiness.

Due to the importance of this life of virtue, we have dedicated an entire semester to its study. But for our purposes here, let us summarize the virtues to discover which virtues help us achieve which goods so as to live a happy, balanced, fulfilled life:

Cardinal Virtues:

Prudence: enables us to govern our actions rightly and so to seek all of the goods in a way that protects each and helps them to flourish. This is where sound deliberation, judgment, and right measure in pursuing the good and avoiding the evil comes in.

Justice: enables us to give our neighbor his or her due. It recognizes each other's rights, despite the cost. This virtue secures right relationships with persons, both human and Divine.

Temperance: controls the movement of the appetite in all of the areas where pleasure is involved. This is how we preserve the good of our dignity as well as another's when seeking pleasurable goods.

Fortitude: this is a strength that helps the will not to abandon a good that is difficult to achieve, even when there is danger involved.

Faith, Hope, and Charity are the infused, theological virtues given to us at baptism that perfect our intellect and will, so as to act with God as our final good which we aim to achieve.

Lesson 6: Plan of Life

We have now arrived at a very practical part of this course, having received a systematic presentation of some of the truths of our faith in order to know our Lord a little better. Knowledge of the Lord is good. Yet, this good is itself also designed to achieve something even more magnificent-- holiness. So, it may be helpful at this time to discuss a very practical way of synthesizing what we have said thus far and putting it into good use. To do this, I want to suggest we discuss and understand what spiritual writers mean by the term "Plan of Life."

The phrase "Plan of Life" has been used by these writers to point out one compelling fact of spiritual growth: without a *plan*, holiness is impossible. Trying to achieve our spiritual goal, namely, union with God, without planning the means of attaining it is like a person who begins a journey without having a roadmap or directions. The end result could only be finding oneself lost, forsaken, confused, and in a condition of despair. A Plan of Life, then, is as it sounds--a practical way for souls to organize the details of their life in such a way as to achieve their end!

Our end is holiness. How often is it the case, however, that in addition to failing to plan properly for this end, many people also fail to establish holiness as their goal because of mistaken notions. Holiness, they say, is *solely* about self-denial, repression, and renunciation, things to be avoided, let alone established as the goal. Thus, holiness seems entirely repugnant when compared with the good things of the world. Hence, when the prospect of having fun and excitement is pitted against a life immersed in the dull, bland, and perhaps even bitter aspects, the goal of holiness is abandoned before it has even begun. So, let us first correct the false notion of holiness. Then we will set about the task of designing our own plan in a way that seems achievable. In this way, we will discover the great adventure and joy of a holy life!

Holiness: A Good Life And A Happy Life

So, the first order of business is to review what we have said regarding faulty notions of holiness. In order to do this, we will discuss the following:

- The basic personal goods we all desire.
- The basic relational goods we all desire.
- The basic spiritual goods we all desire.

Holiness, then, if understood properly, is the attainment of the things which we truly desire. Then we will be happy! It is true that a certain amount of self-denial and even repression may be necessary in the early stages of our growth. This is because our desires are blind forces that, left unchecked, will lead us to destruction. They must first be ordered properly, then they will work as they should by aiming us toward the good with zeal, and will thus be more trustworthy.

The following is a recap of our last lesson regarding the various good, which motivate our actions:

- Desires (or what we will refer to as Goods) pertaining to the preservation of the physical life. Examples of these goods would be nourishment, sexuality, health, sleep, exercise, security and safety.
- Goods relating to knowledge (the intellectual life.) Examples of this good would be coming to classes such as this to learn the truth, as well as studying on one's own.
- Goods relating to the experience of beauty. Examples here would be experiencing physical attraction to one's spouse (hopefully,) desire for art, enjoyment of pleasant music.
- Goods relating to achievement. For example, developing skills in order to perform or play well, as well as the experience of accomplishing some deed with excellence.
- Goods relating to other human persons. Obviously, friendships and marriage fall here.
- Finally, Goods relating to Supernatural Persons. Hence, we seek the Sacraments, prayer, contemplation, and even theological study. (See, you have two very good reasons why this class makes you happy!)

Victor Frankl, a survivor of Auschwitz, stated that he was able to survive the horrors of the Nazi death camps because he was able to find meaning in his suffering that gave him the strength to survive. Indeed, we all must have meaning in our life so as to stay engaged. Otherwise, we will just check out. Our survival depends on our ability to find meaning.

These goods, then, provide meaning for us. The achievement and possession of them are constitutive parts of being holy. Holiness, then, consists in the possession of all of these goods harmoniously. In other words, if in pursuing one of them I were to destroy or harm another, then I would fail to be holy; I would fail to be happy. In fact, I would be committing an evil. This point deserves to be stressed. **Moral evil comes from pursuing a good in an inappropriate way!** Evil has no existence in and of itself. Rather, it is like a parasite that needs a healthy body in order to exist. It is simply the privation of a good that has been damaged or destroyed in the pursuit of another good.

For instance, if I seek the good of sexuality for my physical needs while harming or destroying the good of friendship or the good of respecting another's dignity, then I have committed a grave evil. If I seek the good of achievement in sports but do so by destroying the good of possessing the truth because I cheated, then again, I have committed evil.

Thus, if I want to be holy, I need to avoid evil by seeking all of the goods harmoniously. This is how I will be happy. Holiness and happiness, then, although not identical, accompany one another and are intimately linked.

Further, each of these realities is linked to these Goods because these Goods reflect the goodness of God. It may help to think of a dispenser of six cups situated near a Spring of Living Water. Each cup provides a different way to enjoy the spring. Thus, in addition to being goods they are also a means to receive what we really desire—this life-giving Spring!

If our life is balanced, then we will be able to not only obtain the living water, but also do so in a way that does not detract from or destroy any of the other goods and commit evil, as has been explained. Unfortunately, the sad reality is that this balance is very difficult for us due to the fall. We not only have the tendency to choose evil, but we also have difficulty avoiding excess. Fortunately, there is a helpful and practical assistance to the problem of balance—development of the Plan of Life.

Plan Of Life

This first element involved in establishing a Plan of Life is to realize one very important fact: holiness is for me! It is possible in my state of life! Sanctity is not just for the priest, nun, or monk living in some cloister somewhere. It is for me as well, and I must take advantage of the means available to me if I am to achieve the marvelous destiny.

The next element of a plan of life is to establish a spiritual routine. When practicing an instrument or learning a language, a pupil must establish healthy work habits which, once achieved, enables him or her to perform at the level of excellence. So, too, when gaining holiness. This spiritual routine will enable us to become excellent. The rigors of establishing the discipline, which seems to be and is restrictive at first, later frees us to become the artists we were created to be!

There are constitutive elements to this routine. Obviously, the most necessary and primary element is the grace of Christ offered through the sacraments. Spiritual growth is not possible without His grace. By baptism, we are first re-created and transformed into His image. Then, via other the sacraments, we are empowered to act like Him. **Thus, we first need to establish in our life a means of frequenting the sacraments. We need to make frequent Mass attendance outside of Sundays and regular use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation (as in once a month, bare minimum!)**

Secondly, we must practice daily meditation and spiritual reading, the means of which we covered in previous lectures. It is in our daily meditation that our hearts and minds become like Christ's because we spend time with Him. (cf. Mt 6:6) In fact, meditation is nothing other than a discovery of God's indwelling in our souls. He is already in us, we need only remove the obstacles in our wills and intellects to let Him flood us with His sanctity (cf Jn 14:12.)

After our meditation is completed, we need to thank God and then ask Him to show us something that we need to change in our life if this has not already been revealed during the meditation. This is what is known as the *resolution*. We should also follow up at the end of the day with a particular examination of conscience in order to determine how well we kept our resolution. Vague and very general aspirations or even grandiose ones make determining results and gaining virtue all but impossible. Our resolutions must thus be very specific and concrete so that we can more easily examine our efforts.

Devotion to our Blessed Mother is so central to our spiritual growth that it deserves its own place in our plan. The Eternal Son Himself chose no other means by which to become Christ the Divine Redeemer than by the Virgin Mary. She in fact formed Him not only in her womb, but also in His youth. (Lk 2:51-52.) If our goal is to become “no longer I but Christ who lives in me,” (Gal 2:20) then there is no better way to achieve this end than through her. She is the Mother of all of the living, (Rev 12:17); we must give ourselves to her motherly care. This is why Jesus entrusts John, His beloved disciple, into Mary's care. If we are to become His beloved disciples, we must also entrust ourselves into Mary's care. (Jn 19:27.)

Because our physical life is a good as stated above, another aspect of our plan of life should be exercise. 30 minutes of brisk exercise at least three times a week is a feasible goal. We must also combine this with a healthy diet and proper sleep. God gave us the night to rest and the light to work. Staying up late and sleeping in late are often signs of imbalance and disorder in our life.

We should cultivate friendships with people who share our goal of holiness whenever and wherever possible. We are social creatures by nature. God often works for our good through others. He has not created us in isolation. Social networks of family and friends provide the proper context for practicing virtues like charity, patience, and generosity, and motivate us to be more conscientious when putting effort into our resolutions.

This is also why it is so important to find a suitable spiritual director. Spiritual direction is designed to provide for us a voice of objectivity in our goal of holiness. He or she holds us accountable to our spiritual goals, as well as helps us enact them in a healthy manner. They also assist us in seeking these goods in a balanced way. Therefore, a suitable spiritual director is someone who should be practicing daily meditation, knowledgeable in the doctrines of the Church and unflinchingly obedient to them, frequents the sacraments, exhibits a hunger for holiness, and is receiving direction already.

Finally, never get discouraged. In the early pages of the Introduction to the Devout Life, St. Francis De Sales put it this way: we should not get discouraged at our failings since holiness consists in fighting against them; and, we are guaranteed victory provided we do not give up the fight! In two different places in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus himself connects the virtue of perseverance with salvation (Mt 10:22; 24:13.)

On this note, this list is overwhelming to someone who has just begun serving Christ more vigorously. Thus, it would not be prudent to try and enact a plan of life this detailed right away. Rather, start simply. Begin with daily meditation, and pray for the Lord to lead you to a competent spiritual director. We should not be anxious about our spiritual life, just vigilant. Once we have committed ourselves to following Jesus in word and in deed, He will do the rest.

Lesson 7: Purification and Penance

As has been mentioned in previous lessons, our resolution after meditation is so important to the goal of overcoming our faults and rooting out imperfections that this becomes an impossible task without it. This is why St. Frances de Sales says that this practice is so essential to our spiritual growth as to never be omitted. Otherwise, he warns, we may mistakenly assume that we are achieving the beautiful things upon which we meditate, when in fact our actions may still operate selfishly. It may be helpful here for us to reflect upon the seven deadly sins, so that we can better understand areas of our interior life to which we may need to give special attention. This is lesson 7 from our Faith Foundations I course; thus this will be a summary presentation. For more information, consult that particular class.

The Seven Deadly Sins

The seven deadly sins—pride, anger, envy, lust, gluttony, avarice, and sloth—are a very helpful categorization of those actions which damage our relationship with God and neighbor. The purpose in going through this list is not to encourage morbidity or despair, but rather to honestly evaluate where we fall short in order to embrace our Lord's forgiveness and work constructively at mending our lives.

Pride:

This occurs when we focus attention on ourselves too much or estimate ourselves too highly. St. Gregory the Great lists four kinds of pride—1.) thinking that one's good is from oneself; 2.) thinking that one's good is from God, but is owed to one as a reward; 3.) claiming excellence not possessed; 4.) despising others and wishing to seem the exclusive possessor of what one has.

It is important to recognize that excessive self-consciousness can also be a form of pride; a paralysis of not knowing what others will think. A person who carries around the weight of low self-esteem actually suffers from pride because they are centered too much on themselves, and think that somehow they are owed more than what they have.

Anger:

Although anger is a natural response to correct some evil, it is sinful when it causes us to do or say terrible and damaging things. We know that this is the case when our anger is inappropriate for the given situation, and when it flows from selfishness and disordered self-love. We may feel justified in these cases, but our sense of inflated importance often obscures the truth. We thus react in ways that are sinful, and habits can easily form in this way, which is why it is deadly!

Envy:

This is sadness at the sight of another's good, and an immoderate desire to acquire them for oneself, even unjustly. When we are upset at another's fortunate turn of events, or take pleasure at another's downfall, we can be certain that we are succumbing to envy.

Lust:

This is when one individual treats another as a thing or instrument for gratification for one's own sexual use. It robs the other of his or her dignity, and turns them into an object, thus dehumanizing them.

Gluttony:

This deadly sin refers to lack of temperance with food and drink. With respect to eating, we have to keep in mind that although it's possible to sin by eating too much—either because it is unhealthy or because someone else is entitled to the food, we can also be gluttonous by being too picky or too attached to certain foods.

Avarice:

This is greed, and is a disordered love of getting and possessing. Although this can revolve around material possessions, it can also take the form of an excessive desire for position, knowledge, or notoriety. This seeks to find security in worldly means instead of in God.

Sloth:

This is the vice of laziness. It is being bothered by the greatness to which God has called us because it involves so much work. We would rather be left alone than have God expect so much out of us.

Discovering Our Predominant Fault

The interior life revolves around grace and self-knowledge. Jesus gives us His grace freely, but He expects us to apply it and practice it. Thus, we must discover our predominant fault in order to root it out with His grace. There is a simple strategy in doing this. The saints provide us with some common sense methods for accomplishing this task.

First, we must be motivated to know ourselves well enough to be willing to root out the fault. We are too touchy oftentimes, and are too worried about protecting our feelings. This symptom of pride will only prevent us from achieving the greatness to which God has called us. Keep this in mind when wrestling with motivation. We must also be willing to be precise in discovering our faults. For instance, saying, "I struggle with pride, I'll

work on that today,” is so general as to be useless. Rather, seek to find a specific manifestation of pride in yourself that day, like you are too competitive with a neighbor or coworker, or that you fly off the handle easily when you do not get your way. These are specific enough for you to actually work on them.

With these preliminary considerations out of the way, we need to get serious about finding out about ourselves. Obviously, we must ask God for this insight in prayer. When God responds, these insights can come suddenly. In order for us to be good listeners, however, we must pray regularly, and develop the ability to sit in silence.

In addition to this, it may be helpful for us to ask others close to us to help us see our faults. For married people, I am sure that your spouse will be only too willing to help you with this! We should also pay attention to two phenomena: noticing what faults bother us the most in other people (because we often have this fault ourselves and hate it in ourselves!) and listen to any constructive criticism. The criticism that stings the most is the one that hits closest to home. In these ways, we will gain valuable insight into ourselves, discovering things we may otherwise never have known. One final note on this, we should also accept this criticism without offering excuse.

The examination of conscience is also indispensable for gaining self-knowledge. Frequent confession and spiritual direction are also terrific aids in finding our predominant faults.

We must seek to divide and conquer. Trying to root out all of our faults at once will only unsettle us and we will lose heart. It is not possible to do this anyway. Thus, aim at only one objective at a time. Here are some further tips:

- Take notice of sins confessed most often.
- Notice also which sins are most deliberate.
- Notice which sins cause the greatest embarrassment, or that you are least inclined to confess.

St. Frances de Sales leaves us with this insight: “Our examination of conscience must be reduced to a search for our passions. A general examination of sins is for the confessions of those who are not trying to advance. Rather, we should seek to know as to what affections are a hindrance to our heart; what passions are in possession of it, in what does it chiefly go astray? For it is by the passions of the soul that one gets to know one’s state, by probing them one after the other.” An analogy may help here: we could stop the water from coming out of a lawn sprinkler by trying to plug up each little hole, or we can turn it off at its source.

Sometimes, after working on a fault for some time, we make a little progress and the fault seems to regress, while another suddenly appears with grand fashion! When this happens, holy writers suggest that we should then turn our attention to that newest fault. It is like when pulling weeds, we may work long and hard on one weed with deep roots, but in so

doing, may uproot others along the way. Hence, with Christ's grace, we may dispossess ourselves of two faults instead of one!

Any predominant fault will be opposed to either an active or passive pursuit of God's will. Either we will fail to actively do what God wants (disobeying, sinning against charity, seeking our will over His own, etc.) or we will fail to passively desire what God does (rebellious against His will for us, complaining, growing impatient with things out of our control, etc.)

Some Final Considerations

Resolutions should be positive. Do not say, "Today, I will not be unkind." Rather, say, "Today, I am going to be kind to so and so." And trust God, not yourself. Thus, keep your heart at peace, because He is working and loving you even when you do not feel like He is. Satan loves to steal the peace from our hearts by making us feel abandoned by God, or like we are on our own and He is not helping us. That way we will give up. *We must not forget that we are perfected by fighting our imperfections, and we are guaranteed victory provided we do not give up the fight!*

How to Face Temptation:

- We must determine beforehand what our behavior should be during the trial.
- Pray until the temptation ceases.
- Make a resolution during your next meditation and carry it out!
- Assign a penance for yourself to carry out if you do not keep your resolution.
- Know that with each resistance you grow stronger and the enemy grows weaker.

Lesson 8: Principles of Discernment

Discernment is the art of the spiritual life in which we understand how God communicates Himself. In it we experience the free choosing of God. Through it we avoid deception and learn to read reality in its truth. Discernment is the art of speaking with God rather than with temptations. The main character in this journey is the **Holy Spirit**. Man uses his intelligence in the most complete way only when his intellect is enlightened by God's Holy Spirit.

When we are considering an option that conforms to the hopes of goodness that God nourishes for our lives, He orients our decisions, making our heart vibrate with positive emotions: peace, joy, deep certainty, and hope to encourage us. To keep us from entering into situations that make us less human, on the other hand, He makes our heart vibrate with negative emotions: discomfort, embarrassment, pain. Who hasn't had the experience of being pushed by an internal force to embrace choices despite the difficulties involved or vice versa: feeling held back by a deep feeling of discomfort in a path that seemed attractive?

The principle of discernment is simple: *"By their fruits you will recognize them. Do you gather grapes from thorns or figs from briars? So every good tree produces good fruits and every bad tree produces bad fruits"* (Mt 7:16-17). The affective impact that the known or unknown consequences of our actions have on our hearts (peace or discomfort, joy or agitation, a sense of fulfillment or failure) becomes the discerning criteria for the goodness of the choice and will consequently indicate if we should follow it or not.

An important principle to affirm is that discernment is never done alone. Learning to discern requires, first of all, entering into a relationship. It's clear that "encounter" must be taken in its authentic sense. It's not just opening up to some friend, but to a person who has knowledge of the spiritual life, who has experience. This person is able to recognize various realities and look at them through a spiritual lens, recognizing the salvation that works in us, and how our life is opening to this very salvation in order to communicate it to others. The fundamental criterion is the Person Jesus, living Word of the Father. Each spiritual discernment, according to the Spirit and in the Spirit, necessarily happens inside a personal relationship with Him and following Him; we can't hypothesize the Holy Spirit in our existence without Christ and outside of Christ. In fact, the Spirit of Truth (Jn 14:17; 15:26; 16:13), without which there is no freedom (Jn 8:32) or journey of discernment, was promised by the Master to His disciples, not only as a gift of the Father (Jn 14:16,26; 15:26) and as Comforter (Jn 14:16,26; 15:26; 16:27), but also as a gift of the same Risen Christ (Jn 15:26; 16:7) as He who "will teach you every thing and remind you of all that I said" (Jn 14:26; also cf. Jn 16:13). For this reason discernment requires an intense familiarity with Christ, a sense of the primacy of His Person over the works to do and even the virtues to practice, esteem for and exercise of evangelical contemplation, and adherence to Christ's mission.

How Does God Speak To Man?

Through our thoughts and feelings. It's therefore of fundamental importance to know not only thoughts and arguments in themselves, but also to understand where they come from in order to discern which to follow. The interaction between thought and feeling is important because it permits us to verify the effective adherence to God or to realities that take us away from God. Feelings can betray the effective or apparent adherence to God. I can have a good thought of gospel content but associate it with a negative feeling. The question then becomes what is it that resists this thought that is good in itself?

Behold the importance of an attitude of discernment, not of a single act but of a constant readiness. This attitude is based on continual attention and openness to God and to the Holy Spirit. It is existential certainty that God communicates and reveals Himself.

An attitude of discernment then blocks stubbornness or getting stuck in one's own opinion. It's the expression of a dialogue of communion with the Father, proper to free and mature persons. Discerning, therefore, is not a calculation or a technique or an argument or a majority decision. **Discernment is prayer.** The feeling that almost guarantees discernment is humility.

The Fundamental Rule Of Discernment

This rule is based on the experience of interior peace. Certainly a sign of a well-done discernment is the presence of interior peace. This however must be distinct from a "passing joy." It is not therefore a joy that presents itself in a strong way, with intense emotions, somewhat noisy and short-lived, a joy that is very tied up with the senses. This is totally different from a silent and humble joy. No one knows where this comes from, but all of a sudden you find yourself surrounded by it. We don't notice much how it developed, but we know that it's there. At times it's difficult to tie it to something outside because it's obvious that it doesn't depend at all on the "outside" but it flows from within.

To better understand this fundamental rule, it's necessary to know the anthropological framework underneath. Human beings have two primary components: reason and emotions, or the mind and the heart, or again brains and feelings. The first rule of discernment acts at the psychological level: here we experience the **peace** when the rational component and the sentimental one are oriented toward the same object. On the other hand, when someone is oriented with the feelings to one thing and with the mind to another, he experiences **distress**, desolation, anguish, and frustration.

Discernment is extremely important because it's not always instantly obvious to determine toward what objects our feelings and our reason are directed. It's not only a question of seeing what exists but also of understanding where it comes from and where it's going and which type of thoughts come with it.

Two Phases Of Discernment

1. Recognize God as the center of my life
2. Live constantly in God

In the first phase of discernment there are primarily two objects: me and God. So we ask ourselves: **which type of thought or feeling directs me most toward God**, toward a more mature openness, toward a more realistic love? What, instead, makes me close up in my own little world toward a realization of my will over everything else? There are four agents that interact in the process of discernment:

1. **Myself**
2. **God**
3. **God's Spirit**
4. **The Enemy's spirit**

How the enemy's spirit acts on the person oriented toward himself

Because the goal of the enemy is to separate man from God, when the person is oriented toward him/herself, the enemy will try to **keep reason and feeling united**. Why? So that the person feels a certain peace and continues to go ahead on the wrong road. In this case, **the tempter acts especially on our feelings** with sensuality, consolations, and sensual pleasures. Above all, the objective will be that of assuring the person about the fact that there are not obstacles or difficulties and that therefore the person can "be fine."

What does the enemy do to the reason? He finds every excuse for confirming that we are on the right road. He tries to confirm the truth of our feelings and gives basic reasons for an attachment to ourselves. These reasons are often difficult to dismantle because we can have 10,000 reasons for justifying our attitudes. In this way the person continues to be oriented toward and him/herself and thus away from God.

How the Holy Spirit Acts on the Person Oriented toward Himself

What instead does the Holy Spirit do when a person is self-centered? **He will try to separate reason and feeling, provoking unrest and negativity**. Why? So that the subject stops, reflects, and changes directions. An inspiration can come from God and, despite that, can cause us great turmoil. But this turmoil is not caused by the inspiration that, in itself, is sweet and peaceful like all that comes from God; this turmoil grows from our resistance to the inspiration. Instead when we welcome it, or cease resisting it, our heart finds itself in profound peace. **The Holy Spirit works above all on our reason**, proposing arguments that direct us ever more toward God. This is why the person begins to feel bad, because feeling and reason are no longer oriented toward the same object. Here negative feelings are a benefit to spiritual progress. When the person is so oriented toward him/herself, the Holy Spirit can't act on his/her feelings which are totally taken by sensual pleasures.

Behold then that the only possibility for God is that of suggesting reflections that allow the person to realize how he/she is only directed toward him/herself. If reason is presented with the logic and thought of the Gospel, it could be tempted to listen. As soon as reason begins to listen to the inspired thought of the Gospel, it is lit up by brief flashes of amazing clarity and light: here is the real path to life while the one it's on now is false! This dynamic permits reason to guide only for a brief instant. Feeling suffers. When this happens, reason can easily turn away from its fatigue and emotion can turn back to itself. The Holy Spirit will continue to launch its attacks, continuing to generate that healthy disturbance, almost chewing on the conscience so as to conquer that soul. If this ill feeling becomes a more continued moment, then the feelings can also be turned toward the Gospel that reason has begun to consider. **Behold then the unfolding of a new situation in which, even if only for a few seconds, reason and feeling are again going in the same direction, toward God!**

Here is a totally different experience of peace. Here we can understand the difference between a peace produced by man and one that comes from God. **This difference can be explained but it can never be understood unless it's experienced.** The person can truly begin to discern only when he has had this profound experience and knows how to distinguish a superficial happiness from an outside source from this deep interior peace. The feeling that begins to taste the consolation of true love from this completely new flavor is able to now know the reality of God. All this allows the relationship with God to go much deeper. With this, the adherence to God risks being mere ideology and not relational.

The Action of the Holy Spirit on the Person Oriented toward God

The Spirit of God will always try to maintain reason and feeling oriented toward God. For this reason the Spirit will try to make the believer's level of adherence to Christ not only ideal, highly structured, and deep, but also tasteless and detached from the feelings of the heart. **When a person is seriously oriented toward God, the Holy Spirit nourishes his feelings with spiritual consolations.** Unlike sensual consolation, this comes directly from God and is His gift, not produced by human efforts or strategies. At the center of this consolation is not the self but God, the presence of an Other. In this context every weakness and even sin is perceived in harmony with God and recalls even more radically the need for salvation. God's Spirit acts here on the reason, nourishing it with God's knowledge and the experience of the Saints, drawing on the rich tradition of the Church. In this way God acts by reinforcing the mind and stabilizing it in God's thought.

The Enemy's Activity on the Person Oriented toward God

Obviously contrary to the Spirit of God, the evil spirit will try to separate reason and feeling in a way that the person's balance is broken, feeling remains oriented toward that which is instinctive, and reason directs itself elsewhere so that there is a new destabilizing disturbance. **On the reason, the enemy acts through false arguments, creating and increasing the roadblocks and obstacles.**

How can we recognize a false argument? In itself, it's very easy. The false argument has as its primary concern the self, i.e. what will I do? The meditation can even be on spiritual matters, but if the primary worry is centered on the subject, then it's not a real reflection or meditation that helps to grow in relationship with God. The strategy of the enemy is that of attracting the reason, offering new points of reflection different from those before. The enemy tries to make it so that the person worries about all these other concerns and so the reason is again separated from feeling and the person is divided. The enemy has succeeded in bringing about a certain disturbance. Normally the false argument is uncovered by the fears that it sows in the soul, fears again centered on the self. The enemy acts, going still deeper, scaring the person even more and at times taking away the taste for some things. He does this with the goal of having the person experience certain emptiness. Behold then that the enemy can newly try to fill the person up but he does it in a very superficial and sensual way, not real or long lasting. Because the person feels bad, his/her thoughts go down even further into totally unstable terrain and without real consolation. The person will continue to seek his/her balance and consolations, closing him/herself up by becoming self-focused once again.

The First Conclusion

If an inspiration truly comes from God and if we follow it with all our heart, we will be endlessly inundated with peace. The Holy Spirit, in fact, cannot NOT give this peace to whoever lets himself be guided by Him. At times this peace can reside only in the *most delicate point of our soul* and even when on the human and psychological level questions and worries remain, it is there and it is recognizable.

If instead an inspiration comes from the devil or from that which is evil in us (our ambitions, our egoism, our exaggerated needs to be recognized, etc.), and if we follow it, our heart will never find a total and profound peace. This peace will only be superficial and will fill little because it disappears, leaving turmoil in its place. We can remove this turmoil from ourselves and suppress it in the depths of our conscience, but it is always there, ready to reemerge when the hour of truth comes.

We can, therefore, draw an important conclusion: *a divine inspiration can disturb us in the first moment, but if we do not refuse it and open ourselves to it, accepting it, little by little it will fill us with peace.* It is a fundamental law that is valid in *normal* situations of the spiritual life for those who are sincerely disposed to do the will of God in everything. The spiritual life and the interaction between spiritual and psychological parts are complex realities; at times we can therefore be in moments of trial, which make the practical application of this criterion difficult. However, this remains fundamental and we find it repeatedly in all the Church's tradition.

Discernment ends when we let ourselves be taken in by Him, throwing ourselves into his loving embrace, when in our heart gushes forth a sincere prayer and desire: **Jesus Christ, my Lord and my Savior, do with me as you will. Abbà Father!** It is so liberating and at the same time slightly daunting with responsibility, to feel that God has history in His hands, but that to act in history He wants to work in us. Us, despite ourselves, when our good projects don't match up with His hopes. Us, but remaining free to act as God, inserting into history something impossible for man. In this history of salvation made by man but moved by God, discernment is spiritual action not when it is born of reflection, but from the contemplation of the progressive incarnation of Christ in our life, guided by the Holy Spirit, along the lines of the dream of love that the Father puts together day by day in the world that He has created.

Second Phase: Discerning As Living In God

Unlike the first phase in which the enemy's Spirit presents himself as he is now, before a person who has grown in his relationship with God, the enemy knows that he can't conquer it through that which is obviously evil. In fact after being reached by Christ and having adhered to Him, it is only the enemy who disturbs and bothers.

What will make us quickly and easily recognize the divine movements in order to respond to them is the development within us of a type of *spiritual sense*, nonexistent or almost so at the beginning of our life, but that one can refine with experience especially by resolutely and faithfully following the path of our Lord. This *spiritual hearing* is the ability to recognize, among the many and discordant voices that we hear in us, the unique and unmistakable voice of Jesus. This sense is like a loving instinct that always lets us distinguish the voice of the Spouse more easily, in concert with all the sounds that present themselves to our ears.

The Spirit speaks to each one with a *tone of voice*, a timbre that is indeed its own, a sweetness and a strength, a purity and particular clarity that, when we have attuned ourselves to hear it, we know how to recognize it almost without fail. The devil, obviously, *ape of God*, sometimes can imitate the voice of the Spouse. But if we are attuned to this goal, thanks to a loving familiarity and a pure and constant search for the divine will, we will easily distinguish his voice that, in a certain sense, will sound *out of tune* to us and that is therefore not the voice of Jesus.

Jesus, in the Gospel of John, promised that this spiritual sense would progressively be given to us by the Spirit. Speaking of Himself as the good shepherd, He says: *The sheep follow him because they know his voice. A stranger instead they will not follow, but they will run away from him, because they do not know the voice of the stranger* (10:4-5).

If everything ended here, however, the enemy would never be able to conquer the person. Behold then that the enemy dresses up as an angel of light (2 Cor 11: 14) with the goal of infiltrating into the interior of the spiritual person. The strategy is exact: he tries to penetrate into the soul through thoughts that seem spiritual and then slowly deviate, disconnecting it from its relationship with God and orienting it again towards itself. In this second phase, these thoughts from the enemy attempt in every possible way to enter into the soul, into the heart, in the same way in which the thoughts and feelings of the Holy Spirit get in. The art of the truly spiritual person will now be that of discovering the deceptions of the enemy in order to grow in the spiritual life in a mature and responsible way.

The temptations are intended to get the soul to abandon the road taken or get it to turn back to how it was before. Because what happened in the first phase is the beginning of a real and profound relationship with God, the enemy will try to slowly concentrate the person not on Christ, but on his/her thoughts about Christ. Here He is no longer the Living One, the Lord and Savior but is substituted by a bunch of thoughts about Christ. In a subtle and hardly perceptible way, a terribly real disconnection will take place. The person is left by the enemy within a certain religious box, with aspirations of holiness and perfection but with a sinful mentality as if the encounter with Christ never happened. He/she is unplugged from love.

Behold then the passage from reality to illusion, from love to isolation. If the work of the enemy succeeds, the result is scary: devout people without God, without that real encounter with transforming love that renews us and sustains us. The main goal of the tempter in the spiritual person is not to offend God but to attack the love of God, detaching the person from this real and profound spiritual habitat. A break will take place between God's revelation and its content. Compromises are made when we lower our thoughts to the level of our actions. The faith becomes an idealistic theory. Behold then that we experience a break between faith and life. The knowledge of God, if it is real, is transforming; it changes the person because it is a relationship in which the Holy Spirit acts in the person and with the person. God relates to us and it is a relationship of salvation.

Some "Tips" To Discern If An Inspiration Comes From God

External criteria:

1. God does not contradict himself
2. Consistency with the Sacred Scriptures and with the teachings of the Church
3. Consistency with the demands of our vocation

Internal criteria:

1. One knows a tree by its fruit
2. Formation of experience
3. Discernment of the spirit
4. Complementary signs: constancy and humility

In conclusion, we can say that the divine inspirations are recognized by the following characteristics: they fill us with peace, they do not change, and they impress in us a sense of humility.

We will now make the complementary observations on how to discern the will of God.

Is The Will Of God Always The Thing That Costs Us The Most?

The will of God and the inspirations of grace often go contrary to our immediate tendencies, when these are desires of egoistical comfort, ease, laziness, etc.

St. John of the Cross tells us in one of his famous passages: “The soul must be inclined not to the easiest, but to the most difficult; not to the most savory but to the most disgusting.” It is not wrong to say this in the context in which he speaks. But we should not approach decision-making in discernment of the divine will with the belief that God will always ask the most difficult thing from us. This would make us fall in to an exaggerated ascetic voluntarism that does not have anything to do with the freedom of the Holy Spirit. This idea that God always and constantly asks us for the thing that costs us the most is typically the type of thought that the devil begins in us to discourage us and take us far from God.

God is a Father; God does not want to complicate our life; instead he wants to simplify it. Docility frees us and opens our heart. It is for this reason that Jesus invites us to renounce ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him. He also says to us: *My yoke is sweet and my burden is light* (Mt 11:30). Even if at times doing the will of God costs us, especially at the beginning, fulfilling it with love ends with our being filled with joy, and one can say that it is a true pleasure to fulfill the good that God inspires us to do.

The more we walk in docility to the Spirit, the less our attachment to divine will is painful and forced, the more it becomes free and spontaneous. *Direct me on the path of your commandments, because in that is my joy*, says the Psalm (119:35).

We have enumerated some conditions that permit the manifestation of divine inspirations, even the multiplication of them in a way that you can always be guided and moved by the Holy Spirit. We would not fulfill our task if we forgot to say one thing as we conclude. It is a question of a *filial love for the Virgin Mary*. Among all creatures, Mary is she who most lived in the shadow of the Spirit. For all her life, Mary perfectly followed every action of the Spirit in her, letting Him arouse an always more ardent and elevated love.

Mary is our mother in the order of grace, in as much as she communicates to us the fullness of grace that belongs to her. Among the gifts that Mary gives those that are recognized as her children and that receive her *in their house*, like the beloved disciple of the Lord, the most precious is that work of allowing us to take part in her total availability to her grace, in her ability to let the Holy Spirit act in her without offering any resistance.

Mary communicates her humility to us, her trust in God, her total obedience to the divine will, her silence, and her interior listening to the Spirit...

One of the surest means for becoming gradually able to put all these suggestions into practice is that of entrusting all our spiritual life to the Virgin. Mary will teach us that which she has put into practice so well: recognizing with assurance, welcoming with complete trust, and putting into practice with total faith all those solicitations of grace through which God will work the miracle of love in our life, as He has done in that of His humble servant.

Some Passages For Meditation:

Mk 1: 18-22 (the call of Simon and Andrew and then of James and John)

Mk 10: 17 (the rich young man)

Acts 9: 3-11 (the conversion of St. Paul)

1 Cor 7: 29-38 (the best thing)

Lk 20: 34-36 and Mt. 22: 30

Mt 19: 10-12 (eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven) ---“If this is so, it’s better to not get married!”

Lk 18: 28-30 (whoever gives up his house...)

Mt 22: 30 (At the resurrection in fact you take neither husband nor wife, but you are like the angels in heaven)

Jn 15: 16 (“You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you.”)

1 Sam 3: 1-21 (the call of Samuel)

Lesson 9: Sacrament of Reconciliation and Purification from Sin

It goes without saying that if we wish to become holy, we must overcome our sinful tendencies and seek union with God the Father through Christ His Son, in the Person and Power of the Holy Spirit. This union, in fact, is the essence of what we mean when we use the term, “*Interior Life.*”

As St. Paul makes clear, we are Temples of the Holy Spirit. (cf. 1 Cor 3:16; 17) The very life and love of God now dwells in our souls due to Baptism, and we may now walk in ‘newness of life.’ (Rom 6:4.) Yet, we also experience the reality regretted by St. Paul in Romans 7. In this chapter, St. Paul bemoans the fact that he experiences the tendency in himself towards evil, even after baptism. This is what the Church refers to as *concupiscence*. Concupiscence is that fallen tendency to sin that Christ allows to remain in us, even though the original stain of Adam’s and Eve’s original sin is washed away when we are baptized. This fallen tendency toward doing what is evil is tolerated by God because He can bring a greater good out of it; namely, or own growth in holiness.

As was mentioned in lesson 5, our view of holiness is too often-times skewed, as we assume that to be holy is to be less human. (Refer to lesson 5 for a review of a proper concept of holiness.) Truthfully, Christ has set us free “for freedom’s sake,” so that we can “have life and have it to the full.” (See Gal 5:1 & Jn 10:10, respectively.) This “full” life means that we must experience conversion from our sinful inclinations and “put on Christ.” (Gal 3:27.) This means that we must allow Him to reign in our interior faculties—our minds and what we think about, our hearts and what we desire, and our passions regarding how we enflame the right desires. Thus, we must apply the grace of Christ to our choices and be diligent in our efforts. For, as our Lord teaches, “He who endures to the end will be saved.” (Mt 10:27.)

Endurance or perseverance is an odd virtue. We can only develop it and grow in it if we fail! We do not need to “persevere” in something that comes easy. I would like to paraphrase a quote from Chiara Lubich, foundress of a European lay movement known as the Focolare Movement, with regard to our false notions of holiness. She said that *holiness does not mean never falling. Rather, holiness means getting up again quickly and moving forward after falling.* If we do this without either growing morally lax, one extreme, or beating ourselves up over it, the other extreme (both because we trust ourselves too much, and God too little!) we will root out our sins due to God’s grace.

Conversion And Confession

How do we root out sin, then, if holiness consists in rising again after falling? There is a very important gift left to us by Christ: the gift of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In lesson 3 we focused on the importance of the Eucharist in our spiritual growth. It is necessary at this time to emphasize the role of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. How sad it is that so few Catholics make use of a sacrament as powerful as Confession to rid themselves of so many ills, sins, and defects! This is one sacrament that, upon the Day of Judgment, those who neglected it will be shocked and dismayed at what a gigantic difference it would have made in their lives had they simply gone with greater regularity. This cannot be said of the Christian who is determined to become a saint. For this person, this sacrament is absolutely necessary, and here is why:

Fruits of the Sacrament:

- ❖ Forgiveness from God for eternal punishment.
- ❖ Penance offered by the priest gives us the opportunity for remission of temporal punishment for our sins.
- ❖ Frequent use of the sacrament re-sensitizes us to particular sins.
- ❖ It thus increases a total abhorrence of all of our sins.
- ❖ We experience a gradual purification of our desires, desiring God instead of self.
- ❖ We also experience an enlightenment of our mind, and a strengthening of the will.
- ❖ Frequent use of the sacrament increases interior peace.
- ❖ We are reconciled with the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church.
- ❖ Our love increases. Our desire to use other persons and things for selfish reasons decreases.

This is just a partial list of the wonderful fruits of this Sacrament. It is not just for those who believe that they are in a state of mortal sin, nor to be used just in Advent and Lenten seasons. For those serious about their interior life, frequent use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation/Confession/Penance (it is known by all three names) is necessary.

How To Make a Good Confession:

The first step in making a good confession is to make an examination of conscience. This is an aid that walks us through the 10 Commandments or any other listing of sins, and asks us penetrating questions with regard to each. It helps us get to know ourselves better and to discover the committing of sins, which we may otherwise fail to realize in ourselves. It is good to consign these to memory as best as possible. The Church, however, requires us only to confess those which may be mortal in nature, as well as frequency, so that we can assess the seriousness of our situation and do something about it. For all other sins, we must do our best to remember them, but are still forgiven even if we forget them.

If we remember a mortal sin after we come out of the confessional, we are forgiven, but should confess that sin the next time we visit the sacrament. If we have intentionally withheld the confessing of a mortal sin, this itself is a sin of sacrilege, and is to be avoided! This, too, must be confessed. We must always trust God's mercy, however, and make sure to relieve ourselves of all spiritual burdens. The freedom and joy received far outweigh the difficulty in confessing!

Next, once we are in the confessional and the priest is ready, we should say, "Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It has been (however long) since my last confession. Here are my sins."

After reciting our sins, it is a good idea to say something to the effect, "for these and for all of my sins that I cannot now remember I am truly sorry."

It is strongly recommended to offer our penance given to us by the priest immediately after leaving the confessional. While in the confessional, the sacramental nature of the priest's absolution offers us God's own forgiveness, which eliminates the *eternal punishment* for our sin. Eternal punishment refers to Hell—the punishment of eternal death warranted for the entire human race due to Adam and Eve's sin. This is what is forgiven by the sacrament.

However, the *temporal punishment* remains. This refers to our attachments to created realities over God. These attachments need to be rehabilitated by God's grace. This is what happens when we offer the penance of the priest, and/or any penances and mortifications. This is how we overcome our disordered desires for placing the love of things above the love of God.

Refresher on Difference Between Mortal and Venial Sin:

1 Jn 5: 16,17 teaches us about the realities of mortal and venial sins. St. John the Apostle instructs us that praying for those whose sins are mortal has no effect. This is because these sins can only be removed by Sacramental Confession. This begs the question: What is a mortal sin that I may avoid it?

The old Baltimore Catechism definition is helpful here. It defines mortal sin this way: Any act that is serious in nature, (which is the case with any sin that breaks versus harms, but does not break the bond of Charity with God and/or neighbor) done with sufficient reflection and consent of the will. Sufficient reflection means that we know that the action in question is very bad, and we consent fully to do it.

Although this does not always clarify mortal sins in every case—sometimes there can still be a question regarding these three criteria—nevertheless, it provides a good guide for the believer and confessor. The 10 Commandments provides a good list of the kinds of behaviors that directly destroys the bonds of charity between the actor and God/neighbor.

Venial sins may not destroy the bond of charity, but do harm it. Thus, we must avoid taking venial sins lightly. As one priest put it, it's only the second greatest evil in the entire universe! One of the characteristics which may strike us about the lives of the saints is how horrified they were at even the slightest of sins. They abhorred offending God, and would exclaim that they would rather die than commit a sin. This is the kind of love we need to foster in ourselves.

Jesus Himself reveals that which pleases the Father most when He taught us about the Beatitudes. He wants us to hunger and thirst for righteousness, so that He can satisfy us, and promises that those who are pure in heart shall see God. A pure heart is one in which the love of God so suffuses it that all of its desires are for God alone!

The Four Temperaments:

Ancient spiritual writers have delineated for us some components of our human psyche that, once identified, can assist us in uncovering root causes for certain types of behavior. These components, known as Temperaments, are inclinations and reactions that each person has with regard to a given stimulus. For instance, when we are assigned a huge task, or have a large block of free time, or find ourselves at a party, how do we react to these situations? Spiritual writers and modern psychologists have utilized this knowledge in order to help people know themselves better, and to find good strategies for overcoming bad habits. Rooted as it is in our physiological structure, our temperaments are innate and hereditary. They are permanent and can be modified only secondarily, without ever being totally eliminated or destroyed. Acquiring the moral virtues are the greatest means to shaping and modifying them in order to make the most out of each.

There are Four classical types of temperaments, and these are based on the predominant characteristics of our own internal make-up. Most of us exhibit a combination of these temperaments, but one usually predominates. As stated earlier, these are emotional reactions to situations that we have, and these reactions operate in a typical fashion in each of us. That is to say, that there is a predictable pattern to certain of our responses when presented with certain situations. The four classifications are: Sanguine, Melancholic, Choleric, and Phlegmatic.

Sanguine:

This temperament reacts quickly and strongly to certain stimuli, but is short in duration. Sanguines are cheerful, affable, sympathetic, sensitive, compassionate, and are often the life of the party or the class clown. They are gifted with common sense, and make friends easily.

Some negative aspects of this temperament are: superficiality, inconstancy, impulsivity, and sensuality. Sanguines may repent of their sins quickly, only to return to them on the first occasion. Thus, it is crucial to encourage them to persevere through the time of temptation.

Melancholic:

This temperament is difficult to arouse, but once aroused, will maintain the emotion for a long period of time, especially if the emotion involves a hurt to themselves, either perceived or real. Melancholics are inclined to reflection, piety, prayer, creativity, and compassion. They tend to have but a few friends, but keep these friends for a lifetime. They do not forget easily, so any passion aroused in them, for good or for ill, will last for a long time. They tend to be very intelligent, as they are introspective, and spend much time pondering life. If their physical powers are exhausted, their will is weak. They make good artists, poets, philosophers, and contemplatives.

Negative aspects of this temperament are that they concentrate heavily on themselves, a tendency to exaggerate negative experiences, hence a constant feeling of sadness and melancholy, and often lose confidence in themselves and can be timid.

Choleric:

This temperament is what is often characterized as a “go-getter,” or “mover-and-shaker.” Choleric are strongly aroused and the impression lasts for a long time. They have great energy, sharp intellects, strong and resolute will, practicality, and excel at risk-taking and taking initiative. Inactivity is repugnant to them. Hence, they always have an iron in many fires.

The weaknesses of this temperament are as obvious as the strengths, as they are often tied together. Choleric can be insensitive to others, stubborn, prideful, violent, cruel, and impulsive. They can unfortunately make people feel stepped on or used, and can lack compassion.

Phlegmatic:

This type of temperament is rarely aroused emotionally, and, if so, only weakly. They work slowly but assiduously. They are not easily irritated by insults, misfortune, or sickness. They can remain tranquil and balanced, and have a good deal of common sense.

Their defects are that they are so slow and calm, which causes them to lose many good opportunities because they delay so long in putting works into operation. They tend to be insular, and live in and for themselves.

As was stated earlier, most of us are a combination of these temperaments. Yet, it is helpful for us to discover which one predominates so that we can know which virtues are suitable to acquire. With each, there are unique strengths and weaknesses. As the strengths are honed and the weaknesses modified, (virtue accomplishes both of these goals) any of these can become the greatest of saints.

Thus, in this lesson we have learned about using the Sacrament of Confession and self-knowledge in the temperaments to uncover our strengths and weaknesses, and grow into the sons and daughters of God we are called to be.

Lesson 10: Docility to the Holy Spirit

In the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, our Lord gives us the parable of the sower. In this parable—a parable of the Kingdom of God—seeds are sown in various places: on bird-filled paths, rocky ground, shallow soil, amidst thorns and thistles, and on fertile soil. Only the latter offered proper ground for the seed to sprout and grow.

This parable describes the proper cultivation needed for the Word of God to take root in our souls. If we are to be able to discern the movements and inspirations of God, then we need to make sure that our souls are fertile, ready to receive God's heavenly seed. This is what is meant by the word *docility*, which means to be teachable.

The ground that is rocky or barren or bird-ridden are metaphors for the cares of the world and interests that, when push comes to shove, lie elsewhere other than the Kingdom of Christ. We need detachment from these cares in order to be docile.

Why Be Docile?

Docility means that God's plan for our own fulfillment and happiness will be made effective in our lives. It means that we will not offer resistance to the things that actually make us happy, not just apparently so. Remember, Satan and our fallen nature draw us away from God only through trickery; the devil cannot take any grace or inspiration or call away from us by force. But he can fool us into giving it away freely under the pretext of finding something better. He is a liar, and his promises are always empty.

If we find that our lives are empty and desolate, perhaps it is because we have allowed ourselves to be deceived. It is never too late to repent—to turn again—and commit ourselves to Jesus. The previous lessons have given us a way to do this.

As we develop a habitual prayer life coupled with growth in virtue (which implies rooting out our sinful tendencies,) we will in turn develop what holy writers call a “spiritual sense.”

Spiritual Sense:

I often hear from persons who take my classes something akin to the following: “I hear so-and-so say (fill in the blank,) and I knew that it was wrong, I just didn't know why.” This is a perfect example of the Spiritual Sense. Our faith has its own “*sniffer*.” It can sniff out good from bad doctrine, only when it is found in ready hearts, attuned to prayer, and malleable in the hands of God. Faith is that infused gift, given at baptism that enlightens our intellect. Thus, it is capable of illuminating the mind and heart with supernatural instinct and insight, but only when we are living in accords to the teachings of the Church.

The Holy Spirit uses for each of us a special voice, gentle, still and small, made audible especially for us. If we allow ourselves to grow accustomed to it, we can learn how to hear and obey Him. He speaks to us according to our special *frequency*, so that when we receive this message, it is especially encrypted for us!

Jesus promised to send us the “Spirit of truth to lead us into all of the truth.” (Jn 16:13) This Spirit will at once “convince the world of sin,” while helping the followers of Christ remember all that He has instructed, and keep it alive in our hearts, in the community of faith, which is exactly what the Church means by the term Sacred Tradition. (see Jn 16:8 and 14:26, respectively.) Living in this living Tradition prepares us to hear the voice of God; it develops our spiritual sense.

Biblical Images:

In the book of Exodus, Moses and the Israelites are led throughout the desert by a cloud of smoke by day, and a pillar of fire by night. (cf. Ex 13:21, 22) God’s people followed the pillar of smoke and fire, stopping when it stopped, moving forward when it moved forward. They were led through the barren wasteland, and land uninhabitable and dangerous, yet were always safe, provided they obeyed. They never separated themselves from it in order to make it to the promised land. This is how we must act with the Holy Spirit.

Means of Acquiring Docility:

Every lesson up until now has offered us plenty of insights on how to be docile in God’s hands. We have especially emphasized the necessity of daily meditation, followed by a resolution, frequent reception of sacramental grace, and growth in virtue. Here are some additional means:

1. Obeying God’s wishes as far as we know them. We know so many of these wishes because they are contained in the moral and doctrinal precepts of the Church. If the Church teaches us something as part of our faith, we need to accept it with ready hearts, not look for the loophole. This betrays a lack of love, and the belief that the Church is merely about rules. Any relationship can be reduced solely to rules when it lacks love. When filled with love, however, rules cease to be rules and rather become the ways to flourish.
2. Frequently renew our desire to follow God’s wishes for our lives, and strengthen this resolution as best as we can.
3. Ask the Holy Spirit unceasingly for guidance and enlightenment.
4. Trust God and abandon all to Him.

The Deepest Secret to Docility:

If you want to know what the Holy Spirit is doing, *Mary, the Blessed Mother of God, is the ultimate created expression of His mission.* Her guidance and understanding of the workings of the Holy Spirit are inexpressible. She is truly the Mother of God, as He entrusted Himself entirely into her hands to become the Redeemer of mankind. The Holy Spirit waited on her “yes” before He overshadowed her in order to conceive the Man-God in her womb.

In the books of Exodus and Numbers, Moses and the people discerned and even heard aloud the Word of God in the tent of meeting. In this tent, the Arc of the Covenant was placed, along with the shimmering cloud of glory. This is why it was the place of meeting; it was literally the place on earth where God and man met and conversed.

Our Lady is the fulfillment of this Old Testament type. She is both the tent of meeting, and the Arc of the New Covenant, as was revealed by St. John in Revelations 12:1-ff. In Our Lady’s womb, the very Cloud of Glory, the Holy Spirit, overshadowed her, bringing the Inspired Word to dwell in her for nine months, receiving both matter and form from her! He was her living sacrament, and she His!

Modern science confirms this (in addition to scripture: Lk 1:35 and Rev 12: 1-6.) In utero, a baby’s stem cells pass into the mother and adhere to her medulla, a part of the brain. Studies have shown that the stem cells are found there even after 30 years, and are used to help heal the mother from sicknesses! Furthermore, some studies reveal that the mother may acquire some of the personality of her child. Thus, Jesus was always with Mary, and she with Him, as her own gene code and nutrients passed from her to Him! Their physical bond went beyond the womb. They enjoyed the most intimate of connections, revealing the depth of her holiness, and readiness to be truly the “handmaid of the Lord.” This is the essence of docility, and she manifested it perfectly!

A good point of meditation may be to ponder what this meant for Mary, who carried Jesus in her womb. The words of her magnificat give remarkable insights into this awesome mystery.

Our Lady received the Father’s word into her heart, then received the Holy Spirit into her womb so to give flesh to the Eternal Word! This is why there is an ancient tradition in the Church to call her the Icon of the Holy Spirit. Her sinless life and actions with the Holy Spirit reveal deep and unlimited docility to the will of God.

Our complete entrustment of ourselves to her renders us capable of receiving only the deepest and most special gifts of inspiration from God, but also the most profound of protection and direction. In so doing, we not only imitate Jesus Himself, but we also imitate Moses and all of the high priests of the Old Testament, who placed themselves in the tent of meeting or near the arc to receive divine messages and consolations. The arc was also used by the Israelites to scatter their enemies before them (Numbers 10:35.)

Mary is the Arc of the New Covenant, and overcame Satan himself! (Gen 3:15; Rev. 12:14-16.) She will do the same for you!

Tactics of the Enemy to Rob us of Docility:

The evil one tries to get us to lose our peace of heart in order to prevent us from receiving and responding to God's messages. Worries, anxieties, fears, wanton passions, and inflamed anger are all ways that he tries to agitate our spirit, so as to make it unreceptive to the Holy Spirit. He does this by getting us to take our focus off of the present moment, which is the only reality that there is. In place of this, he tempts us to think about the dead past or the foreboding future. Neither of these is real. The past is past, and the future is not yet. In this way, he tricks us into believing the image presented to us, rather than the grace-filled moment in which we are living.

During His agony in the garden, Satan used these tactics against the Lord. He tried to get Jesus to think about all of the torture and pain that lay before him. Jesus dispelled Him with His trust in His Father's will, revealed when He said, "...not my will but thy will be done." In pouring ourselves into our Father's hands in trust, we will destroy the devil's plan to tempt us into turmoil. This trust displays complete abandonment into the Father's hands; that He will bring us safely through even the most severe of difficulties and dangers, leading us to final victory!

Thus, docility means trust—trusting the plans and concern of our Heavenly Father for our lives. He has designed each of us for happiness, and He knows the path to the end perfectly, if only we would trust Him! Docility enables us to move in and through and with the Spirit of God, in accords with His plan, in order to reach our destiny! We are royal sons and daughters of God. There is not an end or purpose more grand and fantastic than that! We must trust Him, though, in order to achieve this.

Obedience, the Final Ingredient:

Obedience is the virtue necessary for docility. We need to forge an obedient heart to be open to Christ and His Church. The Israelites suffered terrible indignities and exiles because their hearts were hard, like the tablets of stone upon which were written the 10 Commandments. Ezekiel the prophet foretells of the time of the Messiah, when new "fleshy hearts" would be given to God's people, so that they (we) would obey His statutes and commands, through the washing of the waters of renewal. (cf. Ez 36:24-29)

When we doubt or withhold our assent to the teachings of the Catholic Church, we are no longer operating with faith, but with coincidence. We accept those teachings of the Church that coincidentally agree with our positions. In other words, we believe only that which suits ourselves, rejecting anything that does not. In this case, we are not operating with the obedience of faith, but following our own inclinations instead. These inclinations are fallen, and we will not find our way in that case.

Lesson 11: Spiritual Direction

One of the many clear messages gleaned from praying through the Sacred Scriptures is that God creates us to be in community; we are not intended to be an isolated island. We need to depend on each other, seek council from each other, and encourage one another. In fact, this is the underlying assumption for why the New Testament writers even write! St. Paul mentors Timothy and Titus, he writes to the Churches throughout Asia Minor encouraging them and calling them to do the same with one another, and he is simply following the example set by the Master Himself, as Jesus mentored His Apostles everyday for three years.

God does not expect us to be alone on our spiritual journey. He calls us to communion with Himself, and He is a communion of persons, as well as with one another. This is why Jesus makes clear that the two greatest commandments—love God and love neighbor—are great because they are intimately related. The old saying, ‘two heads are better than one’ is just as true in the spiritual life as it is in the natural life. For this reason, God calls us to seek wise counsel on our own individual spiritual journeys. This is why we need to find a competent spiritual mentor or director for ourselves. This lesson will explain the purpose of spiritual direction, as well as the criteria for what makes a good spiritual mentor or director.

Spiritual Mentorship And Directorship:

A Spiritual Director is someone whom we choose to guide us along the paths of wisdom and righteousness for our journey to heaven. It is a person truly under the dominion of the Holy Spirit, who is the primary Spiritual Director. The word *spiritual* refers to the life lived in and through the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity. *Direction* refers to the fact that there is a leader for our heavenly journey, who will offer us a plan to follow. This journey is of course in, with, and through the help of God.

The difference between a director and a mentor for this process differs on three things:

1. The level of theological training of the one directing or mentoring.
2. The amount of experience of the one directing or mentoring.
3. The needs of the person seeking mentorship or direction. Meaning, if the person is just getting started on his or her spiritual journey and has never had a director before, perhaps what they really need, then, is someone to hold them accountable, as well as offer suggestions as to the good habits that one ought to be cultivating, like, frequenting the sacraments; spending at least ½ hour a day in mental prayer; making and keeping a resolution, etc. This can be done by a mentor.

What Direction is Not:

Too often the temptation occurs for directors and directees to view their time together as a counseling session. Directors/ Mentors want to assist in anyway they can and can overestimate their competency, and directees can see this as an opportunity to air grievances and unload problems. Although dealing with problems of moral and spiritual sorts are the proper domain of direction, spiritual direction is not the proper arena for dealing with or seeking to solve relational, psychological, and mental problems. In these cases, it is proper for persons in need to seek help from psychologists and counselors.

Furthermore, direction is not the place to find an answer for all of life's problems, or a way to learn one's faith. Rather, it is very specific; spiritual direction and mentorship is aimed at helping a person become holy, to commit oneself more seriously to one's faith life. The director is a voice of objectivity, a neutral set of eyes and ears to help us see things that we are not able to see on our own, and to encourage us to formulate habits that we are otherwise unable to formulate. This is the proper role and domain of Spiritual Direction/Mentorship.

One final note, the director is not to have absolute sway over the directee. The purpose is to provide spiritual principles that, once integrated into the person's heart and psyche, give a certain freedom and independence of action. A good analogy is that of a piano teacher: the pupil may feel burdened by the rules and regulations governing their instrument, and the teacher may seem authoritarian at first, but as these rules become integrated into good musical habits, the pupil is freed to become an artist!

Necessity of Direction:

Time on this earth is short. We have only one chance to conform our lives to God's perfect will. Thus, the stakes are too high and the difficulties too great for us to journey alone. There are people who are trained and competent to assist us, and we should seek their wise counsel.

An example of the role of director/directee is provided for us in the Gospel of Mark, 10:17. In this passage, the following takes place:

- ❖ A man runs up to Jesus. (The necessity of spiritual direction.)
- ❖ He kneels down in front of Him. (Humility)
- ❖ He asks Jesus' assistance. (Docility.)
- ❖ "Good teacher," he says...(Recognition of who the primary Director of souls really is.)
- ❖ "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Desire to obey.)
- ❖ Eternal Life: this is the goal and purpose of direction.
- ❖ Unfortunately, the rich young man goes away sad. This is because he is unwilling to undertake the task of self-denial, a necessary quality for those who would come after Jesus. "Unless you deny yourself and take up your cross you have no life in me." (Mt 10:38)

The director is trained to help us explore the movements of God within our individual everyday life experiences in order to remain focused on the end in mind; namely, heaven. He or she educates us in the sense that he helps us unveil something that is already there.

“The spiritual director,” Thomas Merton wrote, “is concerned with the whole person, for the spiritual life is not just the life of the mind, or of the affections, or of the ‘summit of the soul’—it is the life of the whole person... a spiritual director is, then, one who helps another to recognize and to follow the inspirations of grace in their life.”

Qualities of a Spiritual Director:

As mentioned above in the distinction between spiritual director and mentor, the director must have at least a Master’s Degree level of education in some field of theology. In both cases, a director and mentor must be thoroughly loyal to the teachings of the Church, as sound doctrine is utterly essential. Someone who acts disobediently with regard to Christ’s teachers is a dangerous and unreliable guide. As Jesus taught, “When the blind lead the blind, they both fall into a pit.” (Mt 15:14.)

Notice in the Gospels how often people in large number turn out to hear Jesus. Certainly, there are many who come to be healed; but they are all there to hear Him teach! They desire sound doctrine, and Matthew comments that, “He taught them as one with authority, unlike the scribes and Pharisees.” (Mt 7:29.)

Thus, a basic understanding of the following doctrines is essential for anyone who wishes to aid souls along their journey:

- ❖ The basic role of each Person of the Blessed Trinity in the Divine Economy (the way in which God relates to and sustains His creation.)
- ❖ The necessity of grace.
- ❖ Familiarity with the scriptures, especially the Gospels.
- ❖ Knowledge of and commitment to the moral precepts of the Church (10 Commandments, teachings on pre-marital and marital chastity, effects of concupiscence, etc.)
- ❖ Knowledge regarding the virtues and how they strengthen the will.
- ❖ Familiarity with Christ’s teachings on the Beatitudes.
- ❖ Sound Christian anthropology (how intellect, will, and passions relate to each other both after the fall, and now how Christ restores their integrity.)
- ❖ Understanding of the Four last things: Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell.

Next, the director should also exhibit discretion. This is the ability to discern. For this, he or she needs to have an active life of mental prayer, is seeking direction himself, frequents the sacraments, exhibits virtue, and balance. These qualities are indispensable if we, as the directee, expect our advice to be sound.

Directors also need to have a compassionate heart, and understand the human heart. St. Frances de Sales was fond of saying that, “a little bit of honey is more attractive than a lot of vinegar.” In other words, the director should have “good bed-side manner.”

Mentors should be formed well enough to understand the basics of the spiritual life, as well as exhibit the necessary qualities just mentioned.

Dispositions for Those Seeking Advice:

As a directee, we should have the following qualities:

- ❖ The desire to grow spiritually.
- ❖ To intend to undertake a life of prayer.
- ❖ A willingness to give of oneself, of forgetting oneself, and caring generously for others. I make it a point to tell my directees that I am not interested in them if they are not brutally honest with me. Honesty, sincerity, and transparency are essential in order for the light of truth to shine in our souls.
- ❖ A willingness to follow through with what has been offered to us as counsel and/or practice.

Many people say, ‘I do not know what to talk about.’ In some way, anything that happens to us can be a topic of these conversations. Things like: difficulties in prayer, temptations, struggles with good or evil desires, victories or defeats, noble aspirations, worries, joys, sorrows, defects, sins, struggles with daily activities like work, family, or friends, social relations, and apostolate. All of these are proper material for discussion in spiritual direction.

Fruits Obtained From Spiritual Direction/Mentorship:

Here I wish to reiterate what has just been stated: the fruits obtained from spiritual direction depend greatly on the personal dispositions of the one being advised. Furthermore, it goes without saying the cooperation with grace and docility to the Holy Spirit are allowed for the greatest of fruits to be exhibited in the life of the directee.

- 1.) The first fruit is Sincerity. Without this fruit, we cannot be known nor let the light of truth shine in our hearts. Communication and openness will create positive habits in dispositions of truthfulness and sincerity in our lives in general.
- 2.) The second fruit is docility. The word '*docility*' comes from the latin verb *docere*, which means "to teach." It is where we get the word *disciple*. Thus, we need to be open and malleable in the hands of a competent director, who passes the grace and light of the Holy Spirit into our souls, forming us more and more into the likeness of Christ. "It is no longer I but Christ who lives in me." (Gal 2:20.)
- 3.) Humility: St. Augustine said that the three virtues necessary for growth in holiness are humility, humility, and humility. That is because pride is so contrary and destructive to the work of God. Jesus teaches us that "apart from me, you can do nothing." (Jn 15:5) An old trick of the devil is to convince us to go and seek wise council only after we have solved the problem ourselves. He tries to convince us that the advisor has nothing new to tell us because we already have a long experience of our own miseries and we know very well what we ought to do. This is the foolish voice of pride, and is a sure way to either fall into a pit, or get our lives tied up into a snarled knot.
- 4.) Perseverance is the last fruit I wish to mention. This is the virtue which tests our resolve to follow Christ. This is the virtue that gives us strength, and pleases God very much. "He who endures to the end will be saved." (Mt 10:22.) This virtue can only be exercised in weakness! Without weakness and failure, there is no need to persevere. But St. Paul says, "...for when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Cor 12:10.)

Lesson 12: Apostolate: Caring for the Soul of Others

Before Christ ascended into heaven, He spoke some final words to His apostles:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

This is one huge job description for the Apostles and followers of Jesus! He calls us to go and teach everyone everything that He has commanded, until the end of time. This is what is meant by the word *apostolate*, which comes from the word *apostle*, which means ‘one who is sent.’

Christ sends us out, with His Spirit, to teach and preach and minister to His children throughout all of the earth. This is a great honor placed upon us, reflective of the dignity with which He has endowed us. He is perfectly capable of performing these tasks Himself. He is not limited by anything, not even death! Yet, out of respect for the dignity that He has placed on us, He calls upon us to participate in His work so that we can share His beautiful message of salvation to the world.

“And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues.” (1 Cor 12: 28)

Thus, we are our brother’s keeper, and need to concern ourselves with the corporal (bodily) and spiritual well-being of others.

The following passage illustrates our Lord's command regarding the care of others. This care has been categorized into what we now call the Corporal (bodily) and Spiritual works of Mercy:

Mt 25:34 "Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me.'"

1. Feed the hungry
2. Give drink to the thirsty
3. Clothe the naked
4. Shelter the homeless
5. Visit the sick
6. Visit those in prison
7. Bury the dead

The Spiritual works of Mercy are these:

1. Convert the sinner
2. Instruct the ignorant
3. Counsel the doubtful
4. Comfort the sorrowful
5. Bear wrongs patiently
6. Forgive injuries
7. Pray for the living and the dead

The Power Of The Sacraments Of Initiation

We are given the power of the Holy Spirit in Baptism, where we are set apart as priests—to offer our own sacrifices (penances, mortifications, sufferings, and prayers) for the good of others; prophets—living as a holy witness to the truths of the Gospel so that others may see your light shine “and see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Mt 5:16); and kings--we are called to reign over our own bodies and subdue our fallen flesh so as to be counted worthy of our call. (cf. 1 Cor 9:27.)

Furthermore, in Confirmation, we are sealed in this same Holy Spirit and anointed to carry on this work of Christ with supernatural fruitfulness. (cf. Acts 8: 14-17)

Thus, let us not assume that we are ill-equipped to bring others to Jesus and enjoy His reign in His kingdom. We have everything we need from God. He waits upon us to learn our faith and to take courage and trust in Him to bring this to others.

Methods Of Apostolate

The Church looks at evangelization as a process. In this process, the first goal is to set hearts on fire with the power of the spoken Word, which is what early Christians called the *kerygma*. This is the power that the Holy Spirit gives to teaching and preaching, which moves people to change their lives and conform them more closely to the Gospel.

After this *conversion* experience, an experience where the soul suddenly realizes a new power within them to change and love Christ more deeply, that person is now ready to be trained more systematically in the faith, which is called *catechesis*.

These two activities are the ways in which Christ Himself is made known through us to others. It is the job of apostolate to bring each soul we reach in these ways into communion with Jesus. “Proclamation, witness, teaching, sacraments, love of neighbor; all of these aspects are the means by which the Gospel is transmitted and they constitute the essential elements of evangelization itself.” (General Catechetical Directory, # 46)

The most important aspect of apostolate is the minister himself. **He or she must seek ongoing formation, must have a habitual prayer life, must seek every opportunity to receive the sanctifying grace of the sacraments, study the faith, and practice and grow in virtue.** If we are devoted to these practices, then our efforts, based on what was said about the gifts of baptism and confirmation, will be very fruitful.

We must remember this two-fold expectation of Christ, who exemplified it perfectly:

-we must teach the truth in the context of faith (meaning that we accept what the Church teaches as already true, not that we will see if we can get there if we follow our own mental course of action);

-we must do so with charity!

Thus, God not only wants us to *teach* what He wants, but to do so in the *way* that He wants, with due patience and compassion for our pupils. As easy as this is to understand, it is very difficult to live out—impossible without the habit of prayer.

St. Frances de Sales taught that we should instruct regarding the avoidance of sin with the firmest of measure, while treating the sinner with the gentlest.

This is the way God teaches throughout the Scriptures. He is always firm in His disciplines, but always *accommodates* Himself to His people and *mitigates* their punishment the way a good and loving Father does.

Too often we can mistakenly assume that we must have all of the answers before we engage another in our apostolate. This is not true for the following reasons:

- 1.) We have the Holy Spirit guiding us and implanting seeds in a listener, seeds that we cannot always detect. He only needs the opportunity to work through us, to be given an “open window” through which to blow!
- 2.) Truth has a power to it, even when not explained as well as could be. It only needs a hearing to do its work. “...so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I propose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.” (Is 55:11)
- 3.) Our example speaks the loudest. Being a living witness of our message first gives the best argument for our words second. As St. Francis said, “I believe in preaching the Gospel, and when necessary I use words.”
- 4.) Do not forget that our own peace and joy are the most profound of arguments because they cannot be duplicated by mere human effort alone, or by the evil one. They are their own proof of God’s work in us.
- 5.) Remember that they are created for union with God, just like you, and are searching for Him, although they may not know it. We can count on this deep yearning placed in their heart by God to aid us in our work.
- 6.) They have angels who see the face of God. Pray to their angel for assistance.
- 7.) If we listen carefully to what the obstinate person is saying we may discover two further truths:
 - What their root error is, often revealed to us by the Holy Spirit.
 - Why they are saying what they are saying. Attachment to sin, emotional scars, lack of love, bad example may be the real cause of hard-heartedness. In these cases, intellectual arguments will not convince, no matter how logical and eloquent.

This is not to excuse us from the labor of learning our faith well. As St. Peter states in his first letter, “*Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account the hope that is in you...*” (1 Pet 3:15) Rather, we need not worry that we have *all* of the answers before we engage others in our apostolic work.

Mission Field

The key to apostolate is to see everywhere we inhabit as our mission field: our homes, neighborhoods, work places, schools, political arena, extended family, and friendships. Because grace builds on nature, the better natural relationship that we have with someone, the more able we are to minister to them. If someone does not know us, how can they trust us? If they cannot trust us, how can they hear us?

As God accommodated Himself to the moral, psychological, and spiritual maturity of His people, we must do the same. We must be lead by charity, and thus not allow feelings of defensiveness or insult to arise in us when we meet with stubborn resistance. It may be helpful to recall how patient our Lord is and has been with us so that we can respond likewise.

Our apostolic endeavors are greatly enhanced when we do so within the confines of a loving community of faith. There is nothing more powerful than an army of witnesses, even a small one. Our enemy quails at the prospect of just one zealous and devoted lover of God. He is positively panic stricken by the prospect of many. Plus, it is easier to keep a coal burning hot when surrounded by many others versus trying to give off heat when set apart.

Remember this one last bit of advice: soak it in prayer! The more accustomed we are to prayer, the more docile we will be to the working of the Holy Spirit, the greater our faith, and the more responsive will be our Father at granting us our request. There is never reason to lose hope!