

FINDING GOD AND OURSELVES



FR. KHOI V. TRAN
REFLECTIONS ON PRAYER AND DISCERNMENT



IN THANKSGIVING
FOR THE OPPORTUNITY
TO ACCOMPANY AND SERVE
OUR AIRMEN AND GUARDIANS

FOR THE GREATER
GLORY OF GOD



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GOD AND OURSELVES

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INTRODUCTION

Over the years, I have had many opportunities to share my spiritual journey and thoughts on spiritual direction, discernment, prayer, and maturity. People shared that those tips helped them on their own journey of faith, and encouraged me to put all those writings together. Thank God for modern technology and its quick search technology, that I am able to quickly find those writings that were published on my weekly reflection blog. Therefore, this small work is a composition of those writings. I hope it will assist you on your own spiritual journey in finding God, knowing and loving His will, as well as knowing who you truly are as His beloved, in order to endure, persevere, grow, and mature in the journey of life.

We can learn from the good Lord how to pray and discern through His very own life examples on earth! He went through His own journey of forgiveness many times, even within His inner circle and amongst His closest disciples. Every year, we are reminded how Judas began to plan to betray Him on Tuesday of Holy Week and carried it out the next day, on what we would call Spy Wednesday. If I may dare to name that Tuesday as Betrayal Tuesday, because I think the Gospel reading for the day is a beautiful one. We know what will happen next, and it was not a great outcome in any way or means!

We see characters who are very similar to one another. They both betrayed or denied the Lord through their actions. Both did the horrendous deed of rejecting the One who loved them, either out of greed or cowardice! Both were called and chosen by Him, spent time with Him, and got to know Him very well as His very own disciples. Both were entrusted with great responsibilities, one as the head and one in charge of the treasury. It is interesting for us to see that He continued to love them in all their brokenness and imperfections as the Teacher and Master.

The Lord loved Judas even though he was greedy and earthly. He loved Peter even though He was hot-headed and impulsive. The Lord loved both of them even when they betrayed and denied Him. He allowed those things to happen even though He had all the power in the whole universe to stop everything and had things done His way. Imagine what we would have done if we were in His situation and if we had all the power to do anything that we like?!? I believe many of us would have chosen what is most advantageous and beneficial for us. Who in the world would want to endure rejection, abandonment, betrayal, and denial? Nonetheless, our Lord did that for us...

We can speculate on the reason why Judas betrayed the Lord. There were multiple theories and rationales why, ranging from immediate greed to his desire to be in the inner circle by gaining trust from the religious leaders. Of course, many people spilled their ink on the significance of the 30 pieces of silver! Some estimated it to be around \$300 in today's exchange rate, and some estimated it to be around four months of wages for skilled workers. Therefore, Judas' real motivation is not for the actual money, but the potential of being accepted and trusted by the high priests, scribes, and Pharisees of the day, because he handed them their desired target and common enemy.

Peter denied the Lord because he was fearful of the crowd and what they would have done to him if they knew that he was associated with the common Enemy. He folded and became a coward when people were pressing on. He chose to deny His very own Master and Teacher out of fear and to protect his own safety!

At this point, both Judas and Peter were very similar to one another. However, Peter repented. He admitted his failure and returned to the Lord and chose to give his life in service of the Gospel for the rest of his life.

Judas lived in his own little world and its typical, humanistic, and vain values. He was never able to genuinely grow spiritually as Christ's own disciples. Judas ridiculed Mary for wasting money that could be used for the poor. She generously used a liter of costly and aromatic nard oil to anoint the Lord's feet. She dried them, too, with her hard work, thus showing a sign of humility and generosity that Judas did not have.

If you have ever smelled pure nard oil before, you know that it only takes a little to go a very long way; hence, to use a liter of precious nard really meant that Mary did not count the cost in humbling herself to love the Lord. The Gospel of St. John tells us clearly that he said that, not because he really cared for the poor, but because he was a thief. Judas worried about earthly matters, hence letting his senses, perspectives, and outlooks be occupied by them instead of fixing his eyes, heart, and soul on the Lord. He chose to let go of everything when he was overwhelmed by the shame and guilt of the betrayal, and he took his own life. He was never able to see beyond the apparent and immediate.

On the other hand, we do see Peter, who was all passionate about following the Lord, but when he was confronted by others, he gave in to his own fears and rejected the One who loved him. He was so ashamed of the acts that he ran away and hid himself. Even though the Gospels did not give us many details of what happened in between the time of Judas's and Peter's betrayals and denials, we can surely conclude that Peter did not give in to the same hopeless despair that Judas had. Perhaps we will never know what went through the two men's minds after the ultimate acts of rejection and betrayal, but we do know the objective endings with those two disciples.

Peter hid himself. He went back to his former profession and lifestyle in being a fisherman. He chose to hide and bear the shame and

guilt, perhaps out of fear, too, from those who might know him as a disciple of Christ Jesus. Nonetheless, he did not give up and give in to the ultimate decision of despair like Judas. He held on, and that gave him the opportunity to reaffirm his love for the Lord after the resurrection. Thus, in His infinite mercy and compassion, the resurrected Christ asked Peter three times to affirm his love.

Like Peter, I love the Lord, and I am passionate about my faith. However, I have also failed to love Him with all my being. I am a human being, and I still struggle to love Him in my fellow neighbors. I still fall short of truly embracing His will for me at times. I lack patience and trust when things do not go right. I still worry whether I am doing enough, if I am doing the right thing, or what other people think of me as a priest, when it seems like what I am doing is not bringing people back to the faith as I would have liked. In all of my struggles, I have to learn — over and over again — what it means to love and trust in the Lord, even when I have failed at times. It is humbling to recognize that I am no better than many people, but I try to be humble in returning and choose loving Him in small ways.

At the end of the day, I am not called to be successful or appreciated by others in the worldly, humanistic, or egocentric sense. I am called to be faithful, generous, genuine, and humble in following Him. I do hope and pray that you may be encouraged, too. It makes me sad to see so many people who do not believe that their sins can be forgiven and choose to stray away from the faith because of what they have done. They had let their guilt and shame drive them away from the Lord. They lack the humility and courage to return and make things right again. Please let me be the first to admit that it is not always easy to seek conversion, but it is not totally dependent on us because we cannot do much without His loving grace! We are where we are today because He never abandoned us. He sought us out when we were hiding or running away from Him. He

forgave us even when we thought we were unforgivable and loved us when we thought we were unlovable. Therefore, let us do our best to be generous, humble, and persevere in loving Him without counting the costs or humanistic measures!

As Christians, we are called to conform ourselves to the image of Christ (cf. Romans 8:29) because this is how we can mature and be transformed (Ephesians 4:13) in unique and special ways to be the loving manifestations of Jesus for others. Again, this is not something burdensome, of Him asking us to do something to be special or stand out from the rest of the crowd or appeal to others, but to truly and simply be who we are called to be deep from within! When trials, hardships, and challenges of life hit, we are able to stand strong, grounded, and not give in to fears caused by the storms because we simply continue to be who we are called to be in those very crises.

We can see from our very own world and human histories that those who seemed to have it all, especially being able to control, instill fear, and manipulate others, all met their just deaths by the hand of the very own crowd, populace, or people that once drank their initial lies. Evil and its intents can seem to have their way for a short while, but divine justice will always have the last say! The most unfortunate fate for anyone is that we can lie to everyone else, and they can buy our words and ideologies, but we cannot lie to God, who created and formed our beings, who truly sees and knows our very inner intentions. Those who cannot be honest with themselves can win others, but have to pay for their lies and deceits in front of the just Judge. The most despicable punishment for us is in the very egocentric deceptions that we tell others, but cowardice in being scared of living in the truth. May we, then, not live by or for the favor and judgment of others but truly be honest in front of the One who knows our very inner beings and all our intentions, desires, and thoughts.

When we desire God and want to grow in loving Him, we are able to put Him first and foremost -- above all things -- as a personal and intimate response to the love He has first given us. His teachings, commandments, and precepts become personal because they bear more significant meanings for us, for we are not just breaking some legalistic interpretations or rules, but a real betrayal of love. Our attitude in life will not be just for the minimum requirements but a real Christian attitude, for we have consciously accepted our personal responsibility to love by cherishing and respecting everyone, surrendering ourselves to the Lord, and trying our best to become freer for Him. No one forces us, but we are willing to reorient our hearts to be more like Him through gracious acts of thanksgiving, service, and sacrificial love. We can all uniquely and personally find specific ways to dispose ourselves to encounter Him in every human situation to find, love, and embrace His loving presence in all things. We are who we are today because we have been forgiven, loved, and sent forth to share with others His loving forgiveness, merciful grace, and everlasting faithfulness.

KVT

8 September 2025

Birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL DIRECTION?

First of all, let us address the issue that many seemed to be so confused about regarding spiritual direction and guidance. I have so many people who wrote, emailed, or messaged me wanting to find a spiritual director. They had read some writings by the saints or spiritual masters who told them the best way to grow in their spiritual life is to find a director who can guide them. Those suggestions are good and true, but it is crucial to discern whether the person is spiritually ready for spiritual direction, or they are only seeking some short-term pieces of advice and guidance. As a priest and an avid spiritual director, I would like to share with you seven introductory thoughts and pointers on spiritual direction -- what it is and what it is not. I am not claiming to be an expert, but I would like to share with you some personal directives before you or someone you know wants to begin the process of trying to find one right away.

1. Spiritual direction is not for seeking a solution or answer.

Just as one cannot expect full healing and rehabilitation when one is in a triage, one cannot expect to come to spiritual direction seeking an immediate answer and solution. Too many people are looking for ways to seek immediate remediation for their problems when coming to a priest or someone they trust for help. Just like the emergency room's triage treatments are only meant to stop the trauma and somewhat normalize the situation, one cannot expect to come to God to seek immediate satisfaction and to go back to normalcy right away. For every encounter, situation, or hurt, our soul needs time to make sense, be healed, and transformed with time and patience. We are not machines that can just be programmed and pushed back into normal operation in a short time; it takes time to get the appropriate holistic and integral rehabilitation and reformation of the heart and soul. The life of faith and its formation (and

restoration) needs time in order to unpeel, understand, and reform to what is originally meant to be. Therefore, before one is contemplating the possibility of a long-term reformation and rehabilitation of the soul through spiritual direction, one needs to build up spiritual and prayerful endurance with times to pray, reflect, and discern the will of God throughout the day and regularly as a seeker of His divine presence in one's life. Before the integral stretching of one's heart and deepening of one's soul through spiritual direction, one needs to personally seek and dispose of one's self for the personal, intimate, and transcendental journey to come. Good spiritual habits are necessary to habituate and prepare the soul for the spiritual life and its lessons.

2. Not everyone who wants spiritual direction is ready for it.

Spiritual direction is hard because it requires one to be honest, genuine, and vulnerable in looking at oneself, with all one's blessings and challenges, past hurts and their origins, current situations, and what is really going on in life, future hopes and plans in light of God's love and will for us. The process is hard because it requires a lot of self-reflection and genuine honesty to look at oneself as it is, instead of what one wants to be or hide behind a persona. We had all done it in one way or another, in one stage or another, in our own lives. It is hard, and many times, very emotional, to love, accept, and see ourselves as we are instead of the persona or things we had learned to create for ourselves in order to be someone or to cope with life. It is hard because sometimes looking back and seeing ourselves as we are and embracing ourselves in our imperfections, brokenness, and challenges really hurts. As a matter of fact, it has always been hard for us as human beings to love ourselves as we are! One has to be ready to be opened -- or at least willing -- to look deep from within. Healing comes holistically by finding oneself from the past, in light of the present, and full of hope for the future, with all its

baggage and opportunities for redemption, reconciliation, and transformation. All of these sound good for one who is simply reading, but it is hard for the one who truly embarks on a spiritual healing and rehabilitation journey. Not everyone is ready.

3. *The spiritual director is not there to tell you what to do but to discern with you what God is trying to invite, teach, or say to you at this moment.*

In a world of many self-help books and professional services, mixed with a consumeristic way of life, immediate gratification, and the likes, it is hard for one to be patient in the spiritual direction process. Many want to come to spiritual direction like going to the doctor's office or emergency clinic, expecting to receive a "magic pill" or immediate treatment so they can be normal again. Too many people only like to receive a (temporary) medicative solution instead of recognizing the problem and looking at ways to change their present lifestyle. Yet, spiritual direction holistically tries to look at what is going on in order to find the appropriate means through careful and prayerful discernment. Too many people treat God and spiritual matters like a Buddha to be rubbed, a fortune cookie to be broken, a quick fix, or something that can be attained and achieved with minimal effort or investment. We are used to having things our way or doing something objectively to get the result that we want. Yet, real spiritual direction is not any of those. It is a respectful, timely, prayerful, and spiritual journey that needs time to understand, unpeel the layers, get to know one another (director-directee), trust, learn, and be willing to let God lead beyond our natural, projected, and humanistic expectations. The director has to be very careful in making sure that he or she is not opening something that the directee is not ready to receive, else it would do more harm to the person than help him or her. That, hence, creates a lot of frustrations for the directee because he or she likes to have things given

and told right away. It is not the place of the director to tell you what to do, unless it is outright wrong or endangers your soul and faith journey. It is his or her mission to guide you to pray, listen, and discern God's will as you are able. This holistic learning process is personal and intimate, so it takes time to learn (and re-learn) as life gives us.

4. *Spiritual direction is long-term and takes a lot of effort.*

Since the human person is complex and unique, the spiritual director is there to help the person to see another perspective, to embrace a bigger picture or horizon, to hold the reflecting mirror so the person can see him or herself as he or she is, and to find the proper thing to advise as the person is able to accept and embrace at the time. The answer that one would like to hear is not always the thing that one is ready to hear just yet. It is important that the spiritual director gauges, understands, prays, reflects, and discerns what is important and proper to say to the directee at the time. It is also crucial for the director to learn to be patient and trust in the Lord so He can work in His own time instead of trying to push a particular timing or agenda. As I have said earlier, not all are ready as they think they are, so it is important to gauge the aptitude and discern when is the right time, else a rush could cause and opens something hurtful or dangerous to a person's spiritual life and dampen his or her spirit. Many times, it takes a very long time to overcome an obstacle, to understand what is going on, or to embrace a particular stage of life. The two greatest virtues for both director and directee to put into practice are prudence and trust, allowing God to guide and work things out in His own timing — and we trustingly follow.

5. One who seeks spiritual direction needs to be honest, genuine, and able to be vulnerable with themselves, with God, and their spiritual director.

I had seen people coming into sessions trying to find something to talk about or trying too hard to impress the spiritual director. That is not how it is supposed to be! Sometimes people treat spiritual direction like a therapy or counseling session where one has to find something positive, negative, or enlightening to say. That is not the purpose! Sometimes people talk around and about unrelated matters as if to show that they got things handled and are fine. It can be frustrating for both sides when the director tries to lead and guide the person to reflect on the deeper levels, but he or she ignores or changes the subject because it is something they do not want to deal with. That is not what spiritual direction is meant to be, and many times, just a waste of time! One has to be honest enough to talk about what is really hurting, moving, or challenging him or her. It is important to be genuine in being oneself instead of simply trying to "play the game" in order to get the time over with or to find something to talk about. Spiritual direction cannot be effective if one is not willing to be vulnerable to peel back the cordial, effective, or human layers of protection and their persona in order to truly be real with the director, with him or herself, and with God. Just like a physician cannot truly help someone who thinks that he or she has a problem or is only forced to come in, a director cannot initiate something meaningful for the person to seek true understanding and discernment if one only likes to remain casual. In spiritual direction, the directee is the one who has to be humble, willing, and desiring to receive the grace given beyond what can be controlled or comprehended by human calculations, understanding, or reservations.

6. The process is organic and holistic, for we are complex human beings with many layers.

It takes time to build up the trust between the director and directee. It is important to come into spiritual direction with an open heart, humble spirit, and genuine desire to receive divine assistance. One has to

recognize that he or she is not in control but can only dispose of oneself to be honest and genuine, as well as the humility to receive and embrace what is by God. Without humility and willingness to receive, one's heart and soul will not be big enough to embrace the magnificent and healing grace of God. The amount of grace one can receive depends on how much one is willing to be honest and humble to receive. It is important to remember that God gives to each person differently and appropriately, so it is proper not to be demanding and get frustrated with what could have been, should have been, or would have been for us. God gives, we give thanks. If God does not give as we hope, we trust in knowing that His gift is appropriate at this time and that His love is enough for us. The end goal of spiritual direction is not to be able to get what we wanted or hoped for but to be content, abide, and trust in the essential and life-giving relationship that the Lord has and willed for us. For that to happen, we have to peel off all the things that we have built for ourselves in order to see ourselves as we truly are, deep from within. It then leads to the healing and cathartic step of loving oneself in all its brokenness and imperfections as God loves us. The journey will lead us to, then, better discern, reflect, and pray about what is going on in our own lives as to live a childlike faith that trusts and loves instead of being childish with demanding or selfish expectations.

7. Humility, perseverance, and courage (with proper discernment of time and patience) are three important foundations as one grows and faces the different struggles and stages of life.

This is important to remember, and I will say it again, that we have to be humble in order to embrace what God has given us, else the Devil and his minions will come in to stir up our self-centered worries and agitate us, which leads us to doubt, question, and resent against His loving goodness. As we grow and journey in our everyday lives, we will find that

things are not and should not be constantly all-amazing or earth-shattering. Euphoric joy and happiness are not meant for the long run, it is actually the gift of contentment as to seek the divine in the present moment, to love Him with extraordinary love in the midst of many ordinary matters, all done with loving perseverance and faithfulness. We learn as we mature spiritually not to seek the appealing, temporary hypes or highs but to simply dwell in God's most simple way of showing you and me that He loves us. Of course, this world is always trying its best to distract, make us worry, plant distrust, division, and doubt in our minds as to get us away from God's real love and His goodness. That is why, through mature and prayerful discernment (learned through trials and errors), we learn to fight the spiritual battle against the different forces and spirits well with the courage found in the Lord and His faithful love. Hence, the ultimate goal of the spiritual life is knowing who we really are and Who really loves us and wills our good so that when we are lost, we learn to be honest, prayerfully recognize, humbly discern, and courageously return to the One who nourishes us.

I hope my limited knowledge and sharing of what spiritual direction is and what it is not were able to help you discern and see when would be the right time to begin the journey. I am just speaking about things generally, so please do not make a blanket assumption. Real and personal details are to be determined and discerned with your spiritual director! No matter what you decide, it is always important to begin some types of spiritual formation and habit-forming practices to prepare and stretch your soul for greater attentiveness and to be in tune with what God has to say and what He is doing in your life. Even if you are unable to begin spiritual direction right now, you can always learn and have the saints as your spiritual guides by reading their writings, learning from their

examples, and putting into practice their particular paths of love for Christ and our neighbors.

We can all begin with prayer. We are all called to pray! Therefore, do not be afraid to take the time to be silent, open your hearts up to God, lift up your souls, and listen to what He has to say. Little by little, we can all learn to be more apt, prepared, disposed, and ready to receive greater things from the Lord. Just like athletes who have to prepare, challenge, stretch, and push themselves each day for the end goal, we have to do the same spiritually by fortifying, deepening, and expanding our souls to receive what God has prepared for us in grace.

We all begin small, but with perseverance, courage, and humility -- as well as time and patience, God is able to bring into fulfillment what He has begun in us if we trust in Him. We will definitely go through many blessings and struggles, trials and hardships, as well as moments of loving grace, but God is always with us. Just as we need to train ourselves physically to tone and strengthen our muscles, our soul and its spirit have to be holistically exercised in conjunction with our humanity in order to truly mature and be rounded with what God wants us to be. We have to be willing, yet patient, to activate the gifts and understand the lessons that God has for us at each stage of the journey as to overcome the obstacles that are present or have been presented to us.

Whatever your spiritual journey might be, I wish you well and pray that you will spend the time to properly discern, understand, and put into practice God's will in your life. It is always important to practice the necessary spiritual exercises that nourish and strengthen our souls against the temptations of the Devil and of this world as we persevere and fight the battle well. I would like to invite you to reflect using Saint Ignatius of Loyola's own words and his prayer from *The Spiritual Exercises*:

*"Receive, O Lord, all my liberty.
Take my memory, my understanding, and my entire will.
Whatsoever I have or hold, You have given me;
I give it all back to You
and surrender it wholly to be governed by Your will.
Give me only your love and your grace,
and I am rich enough and ask for nothing more."*

LETTING GO OF “MY PRECIOUS” FOR THE MOST PRECIOUS

The second movie of *The Lord of the Rings* series, *The Two Towers*, begins with the introduction of a new character, Gollum. This fascinating character was a hobbit who got corrupted by the One Ring. He calls it "My Precious." Even though this ring of power extends his lifespan, it also twists his body and mind.

The ring is a metaphor for human power and its corruption of the person, which, in theological language, we call "sin." The desire to be in control and to be the most powerful is very attractive at first, but it pulls one in, keeps one trapped, and destroys the person deep from within -- as if there is no escape. The poison of power and its numerous sins are so addictive that they often slowly choke and destroy the person without him or her knowing it.

We can see this corruption within Gollum himself, which creates an internal conflict for the creature. The weak hobbit is often suppressed and controlled by the more powerful alter-ego that wants the ring at all costs! He lusts for the ring but also, at the same time, wants to be free from it. J.R.R. Tolkien, the famous Catholic writer of the series, said that he "loved and hated [the Ring], just as he loved and hated himself." This poor, pitiful creature constantly lusts and chases after it, to the point that he forgets who he really is!

The ring brings him hellish enslavement and dependency on it, but once he lost it to Bilbo Baggins in *The Hobbit* series, he miserably spent centuries looking for it. When he finds it again with Bilbo's nephew, Frodo Baggins, he becomes so distraught and wants it for himself again. He ultimately goes to his own demise when he tries -- his last time -- to get the ring from Frodo. He falls to the Cracks of Doom itself and dies with his most loved and hated object.

Perhaps not as extreme as Gollum and his pitiful agonies, we can find ourselves in similar conflicts. Our pride desires control and power, to possess what is "precious" for us in our mind, but whatever this "precious" thing might be, it often brings us much distress and lack of peace in our very own lives, too. Deep down inside, we want to let go of what is enslaving us, but we are scared to let go because we are so used to it. We are scared of letting go of our possessions, pride, or whatever we have built for ourselves to truly be living and grounded in the Lord! Yet, holding on to our ego-centered, manmade objects has and will continue to cause us our own demise.

Many scriptural passages remind us to let go of our humanistic, earthly, temporary, and corruptible goods to grab onto the eternal, everlasting, and most precious goodness and wisdom of God! We must let go of our own little self-created "My Precious" of control, pride, power, or whatever lesser goods for the most precious prize in the world, which is God and His infinite wisdom and goodness. This letting go of our insecurities, false comforts, and lesser goods, even the people we love at times, will seem like a cross -- heavy and hard -- to bear, but we must continually do so if we want to be Christians. The Almighty has to be our first, foremost, and greatest good, and nothing else -- no one else -- can compare to Him! The cost of genuine discipleship will be hard and heavy to bear at times, but the Lord has to be the One we love more than anything and everything else. Hence, only when we personally know and embrace our first and foremost important priority — God and our eternal salvation — can we love everyone else as He loves us.

If you have some time, please read the short Letter of St. Paul to Philemon. It speaks much about Christian love for our neighbor, one that comes from the heart and beyond social classifications, differences, or reservations. Onesimus was Philemon's slave who ran away, guilty in the eyes of the law, and could be treated as his master would like, but St. Paul

asked the master to welcome his subordinate back as a brother in Christ Jesus. We can assume that Philemon and Onesimus did not have a good relationship before his escape, but the apostle asks both of them to care for and love one another. The saint asked the master to embrace the slave no longer as a slave but as a brother and as a man in the Lord. That is true Christian love! True love is the one that is motivated and grounded, not on social standards, but in the communion and love that spring forth from one's beliefs and understanding of Christ's radical love.

In a way, Frodo treats Gollum with compassion even though the creature keeps wanting to steal the ring from him. He cares for the creature even though he struggles with himself to avoid being under the control of evil, paranoia, and self-centered fears. The main character of *The Lord of the Rings* is weak, like many of us! He struggles to do the right thing, but the desire for power and possessiveness of earthly goods keep pulling him into its deceptive power. It makes him turn against the people around him because he is scared of them stealing the ring from him. There are times in the story when he almost turns into Gollum or similar people who wanted to possess the ring in the past, doubting and pushing people around him away just because he wants the ring for himself. We can sense the slippery slope of over-possessiveness that motivates fears and creates isolation both in Frodo and in our very own lives. When we isolate people from our lives for the sake of something lesser, we lose the life-giving relationships and wisdom that keep us focused on what is real.

Nevertheless, it is because of the people around Frodo who keep him grounded and focused on the mission to end the control of evil instead of letting it control him. Similarly, Christian charity requires much more of us than our human standards of liking, retribution, or justice! We do all things because of Christ, who loves us, not simply because of what we like or what seems to be beneficial for us at the moment. Hence, that is why love is hard and heavy -- like a cross -- to bear at times.

As believers, we are invited to put God first and to do everything out of love for Him instead of chasing after human possessions or building things for ourselves. Once we love Him above all things, we can then really love Him in all things and everyone around us. Each and every moment, we are called to let go of our lesser "My Precious" in order to love and embrace the One who is truly precious and worthy of our love above all things. Only in His love can we embrace all out of genuine, theocentric love for others!

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FRODO AND GOLLUM

I have to admit that I am a fan of *The Lord of the Rings* movie series, because it puts into cinematic view J.R.R. Tolkien's magnificent world and its struggle against evil. I also believe that the casting team did a good job in finding a good Frodo and Gollum, resembling each other to portray their inner struggles to do the right thing. Both of them are connected to the ring of power, but Frodo is able to overcome many of its power-centric and evil pulls because he has good friends to help him along the way. Gollum spends most of his life obsessing over the ring and letting it rob him of his humanity, thus ultimately leading him toward his own perdition. Therefore, I would like to reflect on the two characters, especially the value of friendship and priorities, so we can see the big difference that good friends and meaningful relationships can make a difference in our life and faith journey in choosing to do the right thing

Frodo and Gollum are portrayed differently but very similarly to each other in the movie series. There is a great interplay of free will and greed in the very plot of the series, especially between the two characters. They both struggle with the ring of power, especially with the selfish and insidious desire to control and possess it personally, and at times, at all costs, too! Nonetheless, Frodo never really loses his humanity, even though he has been overtaken by its power from time to time. On the other hand, Gollum is locked up in his own miseries because he is possessive and obsessive about the object. He lusts for it and wants to have it at all costs, hence losing his own self-worth, freedom, and identity because he only cares about that very possession.

Frodo is able to treat Gollum with compassion even though the creature keeps wanting to steal the ring from him. He cares for the creature even though he struggles with himself to avoid being under the control of evil, paranoia, and self-centered fears. The main character of *The Lord of*

the Rings is weak, like many of us! He struggles to do the right thing, but the desire for power and possessiveness of earthly goods keep pulling him into their deceptive trap. It makes him turn against the people around him because he is scared of them stealing the ring from him. There are times in the story when he almost turns into Gollum or similar people who wanted to possess the ring in the past, doubting and pushing people around him away just because he wants the ring for himself. We can sense the slippery slope of over-possessiveness that motivates fears and creates isolation both in Frodo and in our very own lives. When we isolate people from our lives for the sake of something lesser, we lose the life-giving relationships and wisdom that keep us focused on what is real.

Unlike Gollum, Frodo has people who keep him grounded and focused on the mission to end the control of evil instead of letting it control him. Similarly, Christian charity requires much more of us than our human standards of liking, retribution, or justice! We do all things because of Christ, who loves us, not simply because of what we like or what seems to be beneficial for us at the moment. Hence, that is why love is hard and heavy -- like a cross -- to bear at times.

A lot of people who are struggling with depression, anxiety, or relationship issues have similar root causes, which stem from their overdependency and overfocus on themselves, either thinking too little of themselves or overly expecting unrealistic things of people. Like Gollum, we can easily become obsessed with materialistic, worldly, or egocentric goods, and we become consumed by those matters. Many have spent so much time seeking "more" to the detriment of their own health and well-being, at the expense of their family and loved ones, because they are never happy with what they have! These are some of the loneliest and bitterest in the world because they have allowed themselves to be defined by fleeting and bottomless greed and its destructive wants and desires. They might be successful and have much in the eyes of the world... they

might be objects of envy and other people wish to have what they have... but they really have nothing life-giving and substantial because they are all shallow, vain, and fleeting external factors. They are lonely because they never take the time to care and choose to love others, only objectifying or using people to serve their needs. They find excuses to walk away from relationships as soon as they get hurt or do not get what they want because it is all about them! Their ego is too fragile to be OK with the messiness that comes from loving and choosing to love others even when it hurts, is inconvenient, or is hard (because none of us is perfect). They become enslaved by their own obsessions and fragile egocentric excuses instead of learning to trust, forgive, and choose the (greater) good of others.

I really want you to take the time to think about what I just shared... This leads me toward the real question: Why do relationships suffer?!? I believe it happens when we stop loving and willing the good of the people who are around us when we become so focused on secondary matters, desires, wants, or priorities instead of our primary duties, responsibilities, and the people who are important to us. We might be doing all the "right" things, but we forget who is important and why we are intentionally choosing to love, care, forgive, reconcile, and continue to choose them instead of lesser goods. Frodo is able to accomplish his mission because of the friends who are there for him... who stay with him even when he doubts and pushes them away at times! There are times when he becomes so obsessed and possessive of the ring that it robs him of his peace and makes him doubt others. I want you to think about those things that rob us away from the people, values, and priorities that give us higher meaning, purpose, and identity as well! They might seem appealing and good, but they are actually killing us from within, destroying our peace and isolating us so we become miserable and all alone.

Frodo pushes his friends away when he becomes more possessive of the ring. He isolates himself and begins to be paranoid about those who

are around him. He is constantly worried that they will steal the ring away from him. Thus, he acts like Gollum when he begins to call the ring, "My Precious!" Think about it, this happens to us, too, when we become more egocentric and let sin creep in and corrupt us. The Devil feeds on our ego and perverts our desires toward lesser, possessive, vain, and shallow goods. He manipulates our intentions and makes them all about us instead of focusing on the greater good! Thus, sin isolates and pushes people who care for us away as we become so enveloped and locked in our own little world that we are willing to hurt, use, manipulate, look down on, doubt, question, or treat other people only for our own good. Sin and its desire for power, possessiveness, and control push us into a downward spiral of isolation, despair, sadness, and hopelessness.

As believers, we are invited to put God first and to do everything out of love for Him instead of chasing after human possessions or building things for ourselves. Once we love Him above all things, we can then really love Him in all things and everyone around us. Each and every moment, we are called to let go of our lesser "My Precious" to love and embrace the One who is truly precious and worthy of our love above all things. Only in His love can we embrace all out of genuine, theocentric love for others!

In a society that is becoming more pluralistic, hedonistic, and secularistic each and every single day, where everyone is taught and "inspired" to be the best version of themselves, working hard to achieve and become whoever they want to be, there has to be something more. For us as Christians, this answer is, of course, Christ Jesus, but we do have to find personal, genuine, and creative ways to bring His presence into this world. Why? I believe that we are living in an age and time where not many people know, care, or find the time to seek the divine presence and try to understand themselves anymore. Fewer people will go out of their way and change their lives to become disciples. It has to be the disciples who go out and bring others to Him! Hence, we cannot do it in typical ways as we

have done in the past. We need to pray, reflect, and discern creative ways to truly bring our faith to others.

God can do great things... and as a matter of fact, He is doing them each and every day, changing hearts, caring for us in unknown and what seems to be simple ways, moving and transforming people with His loving grace, but it is up to each and every one of us to see and able to appreciate the hidden works of love that are interwoven into the daily fabric of our lives. When we recognize the tremendous, undeserving, and gracious love of God given to each and every one of us in a personal, loving, and unique way, we should, in turn, become grateful by sharing those blessings through a life of service to our fellow neighbors, brothers, and sisters, too. When we personally recognize how much He has loved us in spite of our unworthiness, and how many blessings He has bestowed upon us without us knowing or asking for them at times, we should become humble, caring, merciful, and compassionate in sharing the undeserving but freely given love to others who are around us.

When we know our eternal purpose and mission, we can use what we have in all genuine humility and limitations to help one another along the way. Things do not have to go our way or be about us because we are called to a greater mission and purpose, called to give ourselves and help others through the gifts bestowed on us, and willing to make sacrifices for the eternal and everlasting good! If we are able to will the good of the other person as a brother or sister in Christ, we are able to love them in all of their gifts and failures, hence able to treasure and respect them as they are, instead of what they should be for us alone.

When our faith is grounded in the truth to love, treasure, and collaborate with our Creator to make this world better, we become more humble, patient, respectful, and loving because we are to love one another as truly made in His image and likeness instead of being treated as objects, products, or means. When we love and give ourselves wholly

and completely, our self-worth becomes holistically grounded in the transcendental, eternal, and everlasting, hence being in touch, awakened, aware, and sensitive to the power and working of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

Our faith reminds us that the Lord Jesus Christ had everything at His command and could choose to live as whatever He wanted, but He chose to be poor, to be near the forgotten, ignored, and abandoned. The Savior chose simplicity because He wanted our love, not just some pretentious titles, riches, wealth, or achievements. He just wants our genuine heart, love, and devotion! Therefore, let us be simple, humble, genuine, and committed to our lives of faith, opening our hearts to receive His love through a life of dedication and prayer. May what we have received from the Lord be shared with those around us, not with words, but with a life committed and founded in Him. May we help one another to see that true, life-giving gifts of self do not have to be noisy and egocentric, for it is through His holy presence and will for each and every one of us, we will transform the world (one person at a time). May we give the gift of God, centered and founded on faith enlivened through worship and prayer, to one another without the pretense and need for words.

TO BE AN ANAWIM

The Gospel reading from Mark 12:38-44 always pulls a heartstring for me. It evokes many sentimental connections because I have a wonderful role model who taught me so much through her poverty and dependency on God. It brings me much consolation that the good Lord sees our small actions and inner intentions, not like those of the worldly, materialistic, or secularistic standards. It also challenges me to become spiritually poor and more dependent on Him in my own faith journey. Thus, to be an anawim should be a mission for each and every one of us who are Christians as we embrace our radical dependency on God and His love for us.

I can still remember the time when one of my theology professors had a lecture about the word "anawim" and its scriptural origins, theological significance, and spiritual correlations. It made so much sense, and I could relate to that lesson on so many different levels. In the words of our young people, my mind was "blown," and I experienced a paradigm shift. I remembered sitting in class and thinking to myself, "Wow, this is why Jesus loved the poor and why we are called to be poor as well!"

Even though that is the literal meaning of the term "anawim," the poor begin to take a deeper theological understanding throughout salvation history. They are understood as those who have nothing else to depend on but God Himself. In this way, we are invited to become poor spiritually, living our lives with total dependency on the Almighty.

Not all of us will be able to understand what it means to be poor. Not all of us can relate to the poor on a personal, sentimental, and psychological level, but we can learn to adapt a spiritual anawim way of life! As a matter of fact, I believe each and every one of us can practice what it means to have the poverty of heart so that our spiritual way of life puts God first and helps us find our radical dependency on Him. Not

everyone will understand or willing to embrace that spiritual poverty, but this is the beginning of wisdom and truth. Without that radical trust and dependency on God, we will become a hinder to our very own selves because we will look for people, things, excuses, and even our ego will become obstacles to our very own self-emptying and self-donating love that the good Lord is calling us.

Just like the anawim of the Sacred Scriptures who have nothing or no one else to depend on except for the One who provides for them, we are called to have a childlike spirit to ask, trust, and give ourselves to Him who cares for our eternal wellbeing. This attitude anchors us and helps us with our daily priorities, knowing that we are called both to be wise like serpents in dealing with matters of this world but also be simple as doves in loving, embracing, and desiring what is life-giving. We know that everything we have come from God; therefore, everything we have accomplished comes from Him, thus to Him be the glory! Instead of putting ourselves first and asking, "What's in it for me?" We should try to discern all matters so that our words and actions give testimony to the Lord so our lives become the living example of the Good News, sharing the joy of faith, hope, and love for He is the important -- first and foremost -- priority of our lives.

If we simply speak His name but our words and actions do not reflect what we profess, then our lives become a hypocrisy and stumbling block for others. I am talking about our moments of weakness and the sins that we are still struggling with... I am talking about our attitude and way of life that has to be less of ourselves, our desire to be in control, or too focused and centered around us for Him to become our centrality, primary, and ultimate foundations. If we cannot learn to undo our egocentric desires and have things our way, being too full and think highly of ourselves, or simply only care about what is in for us, then we can never really live for anything, much less anyone, higher or bigger than our own little world.

A homily from the second century challenged us:

“Why is the Lord’s name blasphemed? Because we say one thing and do another. When they hear the words of God on our lips, unbelievers are amazed at their beauty and power, but when they see that those words have no effect in our lives, their admiration turns to scorn, and they dismiss such words as myths and fairy tales.

They listen, for example, when we tell them that God has said: It is no credit to you if you love those who love you, but only if you love your enemies, and those who hate you. They are full of admiration at such extraordinary virtue, but when they observe that we not only fail to love people who hate us, but even those who love us, they laugh us to scorn, and the Name is blasphemed.”

Our words and actions can either become a stepping stone and encouragement that leads other people to God, or they can become a stumbling block that scandalizes and causes people to be deterred, discouraged, or turn away because of our contradictory ways of life. Our strength has to be drawn and founded in the Lord! We cannot love and care for others without His loving grace. We cannot see the bigger reality and way of life without seeing things from His eternal perspective, especially His vision and will for us.

In his homily at St. Frances Xavier Cabrini's canonization Mass, Pope Pius XII asked the question and gave a faith-centered answer based on her selfless dedication to the service of the poor:

“Where did she acquire all that strength and the inexhaustible energy by which she was able to perform so many good works and

to surmount so many difficulties involving material things, travel and men?

Undoubtedly she accomplished all this through the faith which was always so vibrant and alive in her heart; through the divine love which burned within her; and, finally, through constant prayer by which she was so closely united with God from whom she humbly asked and obtained whatever her human weakness could not obtain.

In the face of the endless cares and anxieties of life, she never let anything turn her aside from striving and aiming to please God and to work for his glory for which nothing, aided by God's grace, seemed too laborious, or difficult, or beyond human strength."

I liked the movie about her, but I think the real message got diluted in between all of the Hollywood-centered ideologies, branding, and agendas. Even though it was a good movie, it portrayed her as someone who challenged the system in order to get things her way. It portrayed her as someone who fought against the institutionalized Church and society. Even though she was a strong, diligent, and "feisty" woman, she did all those things because she knew who she was and what she was called to do! She did not back down from the obstacles and challenges because she knew the reason why she had to take care of the poor. Her goal was not to get things her way or to prove herself... It was for the salvation of souls and to ensure that they keep the faith!

It was the love of God that moved her and motivated her to spend herself tirelessly in caring for the poor, needy, and abandoned. It was prayer that gave her strength to not give up and to receive His grace for the long and laborious journey in defending the immigrants and so-called outsiders by the general society. It was her faith that helped her to be able to see the face of God in those who were treated with lower dignity and

respect. She did all of that, not to win the praise of others but to please God in following His will for her and to love Him in the poorest of the poor.

Therefore, let us reflect upon our total dependency on God and how to better let go and empty ourselves so we have the proper space and time for Him. Once we have that spiritual poverty as our priority and way of life, let us focus on pleasing Him, following His will, and loving Him in how we persevere on our faith journey and choose to love Him in others. This way of life is centered on service because charity is that genuine, selfless, and life-giving expression of love. Once we know who we are in His eyes, we are able to be true our own selves and lovingly serve Him in others. If we know our spiritual poverty and dependency on Him, we will also know our richness and truest treasure in the One who loves us. Thus, this understanding will give us the greatest freedom and joy that this world can never understand nor has the ability to rob us of! Therefore, do not be afraid to be a spiritual anawim and love those who have little because we are all brothers and sisters on this same journey of love.

COMMON SPIRITUAL STRUGGLES

The spiritual life is not as easy or rosy as people think it should be! Not every day is going to be filled with grace-filled moments of consolation. There will be times when we are faced with desolations caused by other people or external factors, as well as spiritual desolations caused by evil spirits -- or even ourselves -- deterring us from seeking God and living in His presence. I would like to share with you some common spiritual obstacles and encouragements that might be helpful on your spiritual journey and prayer life.

Prayer is a relationship. As with any relationship, both sides have to be vulnerable and open to each other. In a very special and intimate way, the human person and the Divine meet each other when we pray. Dryness may arise in prayer when we need to share something intimate with the Lord but have not done so. We may feel too ashamed, too angry, or too hurt to open ourselves up to Him; therefore, we brush over it and have not really spoken to Him about it. Thus, this dryness in prayer is caused by our very own superficiality because we have little to say to Him and have not been very honest with Him. In other words, our hearts have much to say but have not said it!

There are times in our lives when it is hard to be in prayer. Time passes slowly, distractions creep in, and nothing we do seems to help us get back to full concentration. We might be doing the right thing and being faithful to our prayer routine, but we feel some types of mental or spiritual stumbling blocks that stop us from being united with the Lord. Those could be moments when He permits the desolation to happen so we can invite Him into where it hurts the most! I remembered struggling with my own faith, especially in a particular relationship that was hurting me in a deep and personal way, but I was too busy trying to "take care of business" or somehow ignore it in my own prayer life. I thought it was enough if I would

do the right thing, "vent" to other people, and seek wise advice on how to deal with the situation. I prayed about it, asking God for the wisdom to handle the situation and the person who was hurting me. However, I was not bringing my pains, sufferings, and everything that caused me to lose joy, hope, and love to prayer. In other words, I was somewhat praying about it, but I was not praying about it! I had to learn to bring everything I was going through to prayer.

I spoke about it in confession and sought advice from the people I trusted. Nonetheless, I never brought it into my prayers! I knew that God was with me and who I am in Him, but I was not so sure if He would deliver me from that evil and hurtful situation. I knew deep within my heart that He loves me and I belong to Him, but there were so many days that I was scared that I was going to be beaten down and robbed of what I treasure the most as a priest and believer due to the unkind words and actions directed toward me.

It was hard to open up, admitting that this person's cruel mistreatments and manipulative ways were hurting me so much. It was hard to admit that it made me lose faith in humanity and whether I will be OK. Even though I knew that I belonged to God and He would never abandon me, I was very afraid of continually being hurt, manipulated, and ultimately being stripped of what I valued the most. It was hard to pray for the person or think of the relationship because it hurt so much! Nonetheless, I had to bring God into the situation and share what I was worrying about deep from within. I had to learn to cry my heart out and allow Him to be with me where it hurts the most because that desolation was robbing my interior joy and peace.

Nonetheless, He loves us too much to leave us alone with our fear, shame, and hurt. He invites us to share the burden with Him, tell Him about it, and allow Him to accompany us. When we do, this form of

spiritual dryness and obstacles will pass, and prayer will be back to where it needs to be as a relationship between two people who love each other.

Secondly, our prayer and vulnerability with God can be impeded when we psychologically project or transfer a person, situation, or image toward Him. Just because we were treated badly somehow by someone, imposed some ridiculous expectations on ourselves, or thought we had to be perfect or good to be loved, that does not mean that God has expectations or demands of us. He does not react or impose negative attitudes, words, or actions like someone we resented, feared, disliked, or wanted to impress. We need to be honest in accepting our failures, self-doubt, limitations, and sins in the light of His real, gentle, persistent, healing, and transformative love. As a matter of fact, the most important step in spiritual transformation and liberation is to discover and love God as He really is instead of what we thought of Him. It brings much healing and opportunities for forgiveness and reconciliation of past hurts.

How other people, especially ones that we respected, admired, or have some hope of being liked by them can cause dissonance between God as He is and our image of Him based on how we were treated by them. Understanding this reality opens a door to blessed growth that heals, transforms, and reconciles. We learn to let go and trust in God's true, loving goodness.

With those two foundations in mind, I would like to suggest some smaller and more practical guidance and encouragement when a person is struggling in their prayer life. First, and I cannot emphasize this enough as a spiritual director: NEVER make a drastic, life-changing, or monumental change when one is experiencing a crisis, desolation, or facing hard obstacles in life. As a matter of fact, turn to prayer by asking God for guidance, protection, patience, and wisdom to discern and not make rash decisions. Take the time to meditate on the Sacred Scriptures and spiritual truths, especially learning from the saints and spiritual guides

who underwent similar situations! It is important to be gentle, patient, and courageous in seeing the deeper issues, causes, and roots of those matters, examining what one is experiencing and how it began in order to see its trigger or cause.

We must remain humble while experiencing consolation to learn to trust in times of desolation, knowing that it, too, shall pass with the grace of God if we persevere and remain faithful with Him. If we are tempted to make rash or poor choices, we must resist the Devil's temptations and desolations at their very beginning before they lead us spiralling down the path of perdition, sinfulness, and hopelessness. Furthermore, there should be no shame, guilt, condemnation, or pride that should hold us back from sharing it with someone who is a wise and spiritually competent guide. Contrary to the attacks, pains, hurts, and sufferings, as well as the Enemy's cheap tactics to burden, tempt, and keep us in desolation, we must be humble in being vulnerable and seeking help. We must remember that He came to set captives free! Therefore, we are called to rise above the discouragement, enslavement, manipulation, and lies in order to seek help, freedom, and liberation from its yokes.

Many more things can be written about the spiritual life and our discernment process, especially in seeing, facing, and unmasking common spiritual obstacles. However, we should remind ourselves of the simple reality that even a doctor cannot heal him or herself. Therefore, it is important to understand our limitations and be humble, vulnerable, and honest in seeking guidance, direction, and healing from those who can listen, discern, and help us see the reality that we are often being blindsided by our humanity at the moment. Please remember that you are not alone in your spiritual struggles!

AGAINST DESOLATION, DISCOURAGEMENT, AND DESPAIR

As we give thanks for the many blessings bestowed upon us in our everyday walk of life, we also recognize the many challenges we had to face throughout the year as well. There were moments of full of goodness, graciousness, and love as well as stormy and dark times when we were challenged, stretched, and even brought to question God's goodness or our own identity as His beloved children. Just as consolations are promised and given to those who love the Lord, desolations can also happen — and permitted in His providential goodness — so we can grow in our own life of faith without giving into discouragement or despair.

We live in a very this wonderful, grace-filled, and blessed but also fallen, imperfect, and broken world. There is a fine interplay of His grace strengthen us along the journey as well as evil ones who try to discourage, deter, and fill our minds with lies and falsehoods. Sometimes, these struggles are created by us because we have forgotten to take care of our humanity and be attentive to our natural well-being. Our prayer life will not be conducive and productive if we ignore and not pay attention to our physical, emotional, and psychological blessings. Too oftentimes we ended up blaming God and dismissed the value of prayer times because we physically, emotionally, and psychologically spent so we lose the mental and spiritual focus, energy, and strength. Not being attentive to our own humanity can create avoidable discouragements because we forget to care for our hearts with the attached emotions, feelings, and psychological baggage.

Furthermore, we must recognize that there will always be a certain amount of discouragement that exists in everyday life. Things do not always go well. Physical problems, financial burdens, family troubles, relationship hiccups, and the like present themselves to us each and every day. At such times, prayer may become more difficult. These situations

call for both human and spiritual resourcefulness and creativity to find new ways to rise above the apparent issues and make time for what is important for both our body and soul. We all have to learn to slow the pace and step back from the typical chaos to not be focused on the problems or overextend ourselves to the point that we have no time or energy left to give to the Lord in prayer. At times, we will have to persevere and choose to pray even when we do not feel like it because spiritual discipline is an important part of our stability and nourishment.

What can we do when we are tempted, tested, and tried, even at times feeling like we are lost, forgotten, abandoned, or rejected by God and others? Perhaps what seems to be easy to state in good times is very hard to believe in trying moments, but we have to trust that God is with us and He will not abandon us to the power of evil ones. Such human failures, imperfections, and struggles lie within God's loving providence. When understood and faced well, they will not harm us but lead us to growth, which is the real reason why God permits them. As a matter of fact, no matter how discouraging it might seem, human and spiritual struggles are not the heart of the spiritual life! It has and will be God's deep, warm, faithful, everlasting, and personal love for us that is the source of joy, hope, and strength in our journey.

There is no shame in struggling in our prayer life! As a matter of fact, the enemies use different tactics to lie, manipulate, and keep us enslaved to guilt and shame so they can control us. They love to feed on our struggle to magnify desolation, discourage us from trusting in the Lord and continue to seek Him, as well as to be locked into our own little pitiful and hellish circle of misery. They can use different tactics to make us restless and be in turmoil, disturbing our souls and robbing us of peace of mind, thus questioning our self-worth and God's goodness. All these tactics are making us think that we are not good enough and should give up on the spiritual life. The cheapest set of attacks is non-spiritual desolations to let

us be focused on the problematic and trying parts of life so we can remain agitated, frustrated, resentful, angry, or negative in our thoughts and actions. They make us become myopic on what seems to be falling apart and not going our way, so our souls can easily be disturbed and unfocused!

The evil ones will escalate their attacks to spiritual desolations if the humanistic, worldly, and non-spiritual factors do not work. If they fail to pull us toward low and earthly things, their attacks will begin to make us question our spiritual identity in relation to God and His loving relationship with us. The liars love to insinuate and make us doubt our self-worth and His faithfulness to us! When we experience spiritual desolation, we must NEVER forget that nothing is wrong with us. It could be because we have been distracted, unfocused, lost our way for a little while, but this has always been the tactic that the enemies used against every disciple of Jesus for thousands of years. Therefore, to be aware of their lies and manipulations of the truth reassures that nothing is inherently wrong with us or with God's love; we just have to readjust and make ourselves become focused on what really matters again.

The Devil and his minions study us night and day, lurking in the shadows and waiting for the moments when we are most vulnerable to attack. St. Ignatius' fourteenth rule of discernment teaches us that the evil ones will wait to attack us when we are at our weakest and vulnerable. Therefore, it is important to know ourselves, take the time to strengthen those needed areas, persist in prayer and spiritual discipline, and desire to grow stronger in our love for Him. Do not be afraid to address the matters when we see our (potential) regression! God permits desolation to happen because He sees that we can learn and grow stronger spiritually through the struggle, keep us from complacency, and remain humble, poor, and pure in spirit to truly be free instead of being full of ourselves or the things of this world.

We are all imperfect. We all have our weaknesses and struggles. We all need to grow and mature. However, that does not change our identity as God's beloved sons and daughters! We must reject the lies when they come from the evil ones. We can choose prudence, perseverance, and humility to keep the course and seek help when needed. The attacks are numerous and cheap to keep us off track, deterred, discouraged, and despairing. Desolations are hard because they make us lose hope and question who we are in God's eyes and who He really is to us! We must do our best to reject the lies and falsities, as best as we can, especially as soon as possible in the beginning, so they do not gain more traction or strength.

Just because we are going through desolation does not mean that God does not love us, that we do not love Him, or that we do not desire to love others through Him. At times, it could simply mean that God sees some potential areas of growth and wants to teach us how to mature and resist attacks along the way. When one feels attacked and discouraged, take a moment to slow down, reflect, do an examination of conscience, jot down some notes if needed, keep a spiritual journey, and talk to someone who is spiritually wise and prudent for further guidance. Do the opposite of what the enemies are trying to tell us in discouragement!

Of course, the evil ones will want us not to pray and give up on everything that would bless our spiritual life. They will make us feel distracted, agitated, frustrated, negative, lukewarm, indifferent, unenthusiastic, and without affect. Nonetheless, do not give up or make any dramatic changes to what you and I have committed in times of consolation, level-headedness, and through proper discernment! Furthermore, we must be humble, transparent, and honest in sharing our struggles, seeking prudential and wise advice, and speaking to a spiritually competent person who can spiritually guide and discern God's will for us

and with us. As we face desolations, discouragements, and despairs throughout our spiritual journey, I encourage each and every one of us not to give up or give in. There is no shame or guilt in seeking help and allowing God's grace to make us grow through patient endurance, persistence, and humility. Remember that He wills that we are spiritually free and liberated from the manipulations and lies that are self-imposed, worldly, or evil. There will, of course, be struggles but no one can ever steal our simplicity, pure, and childlike joy that we have in Him so do not be discouraged, despairing, and live in desolation.

LESSON 1 FOR TIMES OF LONELINESS

No one wants to be lonely, yet loneliness is part of our human journey. It is one of the deepest, most universal, and most profound experiences that we have as human beings. While it is hard to admit our loneliness and its pains, we should recognize that it is not simply a mark of shame and weakness. It could happen to the most visibly normal and seemingly healthy people. Therefore, there should be no stigma given to this intimate and natural feeling and struggle. Loneliness is only dangerous and detrimental when it is not recognized, accepted, and discerned properly through a holistic understanding of our human identity.

While we all yearn for full, intimate, satisfactory, and euphoric union with God and others, moments of pain and loneliness are parts of our very innate desire and universal language of love. There are several ways to deal with this type of creative tensions, yet many allowed themselves to be consumed by daily routines and busybody works that take up their time, energy, and creativity so they do not have to worry about the awkward silence; however, this is often the beginning of many problems as we try to ignore, forget, and silence the necessary soul-searching opportunity in its utmost depth. As our world becomes more self-centered and individualistic, the family connection and sense of communal identity lessen. This intensifies loneliness because it undercuts much of the interdependence that was foundational for many of our older generations. Constantly being occupied by whatever is in front of us and on-screen, envy and self-pity kick in as we become unhappy, seeing the different things being presented but can never seem to attain them fully. Now with the pace of life ever increasing in tempo, technology and social media occupying many parts of our daily interactions, we find it harder to relate and communicate well, especially matters of the heart. Hence, all of these cultural and social phenomena create an ever-

increasing sense of loneliness because we feel inadequate, frustrated, and unhappy in a consumeristic world.

There are some signs that we can recognize when things that are occupying our lives become toxic and detrimental. It is important to realize the potential pitfalls before they become destructive of real human intimacy and love. First of all, when we are unhappy with what we have and with our own lives, it is very easy to become jealous and overly possessive of our friends and loved ones. We are scared to share and let go because we want to be loved so badly that we try to lock everyone in and choke them through control and manipulation. Some signs of this over-possessiveness are outrageous demands for time, affection, and exclusivity. Paradoxically speaking, as we try hard to control and win people's friendship, we end up alienating ourselves from them as we counterproductively overexert ourselves. It is important to remember that no relationship, no friend, nothing, however deep or intimate, can ever fully take our loneliness away. To put those unrealistic demands upon those who are around us is futile because they are not meant to save us or make us happy.

Many people go through life frustrated and restless, because they let their raw energies push them from one direction to the next, never able to be content or settle down, not willing to take the time to reflect, discern, and pray about what they are called to do, nor have enough discipline to achieve the ends all of us are meant to attain in the eyes of God. These are the basic causes of a self-inflicted desolation through spiritual sloth and a narrow-visioned understanding of reality. As complex yet confusing human beings, it is very easy to become infatuated with certain things, hung up on certain people, nostalgic about certain past people or events, and caught up in unrealistic daydreams and fantasies. Yet, all these things make us lose focus on the present moment in order to truly give ourselves

to the event and people who are present in our lives. Even though we want to be possessive of relationships, we cannot genuinely and dutifully give ourselves totally, we put on a facade of presence to play along or to get what we want but still go home and be alone. Too many people want everything or more than what they can actually receive or give genuinely, hence ending up with nothing except their own self that is hurt. It is important to know that we cannot have it all, for every sincere choice and relationship is a necessary limitation to other competing goods.

Loneliness, when unchecked, leads us to premature and irresponsible actions in order to silence the pains and hurts, to fill the void of the heart, or manipulatively objectifying other people to get what we want for the present moment. Drugs, meaningless sexual encounters, or other addictive outlets, are but few of these self-centered and attractively false solutions. These options end up objectifying people and dehumanize them by weakening our God-given dignity, disrespect them and ourselves through manipulative means, and further destroy our real self-esteem. We become more hurt deep from within, yet hardened and insensitive because we do not want to be hurt by others but willing to use others to get what we want. A hardened, embittered, controlling, insensitive, and manipulative person is nothing more than a person who is too hurt and too scared to come to grips with his or her own loneliness! A desensitized person, frozen by his or her own fears, is incapable to feel anything real and everlasting except for what can be felt sensibly or temporary at the moment. It is very easy to resist redemption because we do not want to cry, to admit our guilt, to own up to our pains, sufferings and hurts, and to reach out for help.

All these diverse feelings of restlessness, emptiness, longing, alienation, paranoia, loneliness, guilt, shame, and the likes are both painful confusion and creative tension. They are there to remind us that we

are humans, emotionally alive and well, but we cannot save ourselves. There are things that we cannot solve ourselves because there is a spot in us that will not be filled, a thirst that cannot be quenched, and a hunger that cannot be satisfied by any human or social mean. We can rationalize and try to control them, yet continued to be unhappy and cynical as we try to force ourselves in doing fruitless and tiring things to the soul, but the abiding pains are still there. When undealt with, these things make us into a not very beautiful person who constantly complaining, forming unfair judgments, and seeing the world in a negative and distorted way because we try to rationalize and control everything our way. We play games with others, break down relationships, isolate, make us tired, sour our attitudes, destroy our freedom, and make us repulsive. Sadly, these things enslave us because we end up doing things that are no longer really expressive of our true selves. We become powerless to be our own person because we are locked in our own created hell. Loneliness and its pains make us locked up in our own emotional, psychological, and even physical handicaps through rejection, separation, and or anything else that could possibly invite genuine intimacy and interpersonal love.

This constant, ever-present sense of not belonging is often caused by our own fears, especially the fear of commitment and faithfulness. Too many of our life choices are being held back by our own refusal to commit and give ourselves wholeheartedly or permanently to anything beyond our calculative control or understanding. It is too easy to play the game to ultimately benefit us in some ways at the end of the day than to truly be vulnerable, honest, genuine, and transparent with another person. Cheap commitments, broken promises, empty words, hasty decisions, unfaithfulness, and short-lived loyalty are but a few of these things that keep everyone to themselves, wanting something more but too scared to truly give any substantial. Authentic relationship, trust, and growth cannot

be forced or calculated in our own time but must be given enough time, treated with patience and respect, so that they can have time to develop instead of taking cheap shortcuts.

Therefore, the only solution is to go beyond ourselves, reach deep from within, and see ourselves as we are in the everlasting, timeless, and never-changing love of God. Before we were born in our own mother's womb, we were loved into being by the Almighty. That love has left a permanent mark, the everlasting imprint of a love so tender and good that its transcendental memory can be seen through every vestige, encounter, relationship, person, or thing found in this world. It lies beyond our natural or human understanding but forms the center of our heart and soul. The only salvific redemption from our own loneliness is the journey that seeks and to be in touch with the everlasting love that gives us life and makes us who we are today. This timeless love makes every moment, encounter, and person in time makes sense and become meaningful with love, by love, and through love.

LESSON 2 FOR TIMES OF LONELINESS

So, what is this everlasting, timeless love that we seek? Why is there an insatiable burning desire and restlessness that pushes us to pursue some unknown desire to be whole and to be loved? Why can we feel its presence deep from within, but cannot explain what it is?

Within each of us, there is a still small voice and sense of being touched, loved, and valued in a way that is beyond anything we have ever psychologically or emotionally, humanly or consciously, experienced. Everything that we hold dear in this world falls short of description because it is something deeper and more intimate than what we can define with human goodness, love, value, intimacy, or tenderness. This is the place where our heart of hearts feels loved, a place so sacred and precious that no one can really understand or sufficiently describe in words. From this love, kisses and embraces are simply given as extensions, as well as tears and sorrows, as they are still but signs and responses to what we already hold dear from within.

Perhaps Saint Augustine gives us a hint when he puts this creative power into words: "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in You." The Lord has made everything beautiful in its own time, but He puts in each and every one of us His everlasting love so we can seek Him beyond the things of this world and understand our lives, from beginning to end, in light of His eternal and providential love. This place where we encounter God and His love for us is often called the "meeting ground" in spiritual, mystical language. It is very intimate but very universal; no one else understands it but us; however, everyone has the yearning and recognition of it. It is a place of true intimacy without pretension, a place of transparency and vulnerability, a place of honesty and humility, a place of innocence as we come with childlike faith and love

to the One who created and loved us into being. In this place, we are holy, as temples of the Lord, as we recognize, understand, and willingly embrace our true identity in His image and likeness. The things of this world "touch our heart" when we can relate and understand since they have already been touched, taught, and given to us by the Creator from the beginning of time. Things that are true resonate with us because these eternal truths are already given to us and are everlasting with the love of God. We measure everything in life by how it touches this sacred reality. When we are in touch with this eternal love, we become more compassionate, merciful, loving, caring, and sensitive to other people's needs because we experience through them the real nourishment of our souls.

However, it is often hard to be honest, genuine, vulnerable, and transparent with ourselves. Why? We tend to live with certain fantasies and illusions of who we are and where we fit into the scheme of things. We dream about what we want to be, and after a while, they become mixed into how we see and interpret reality. We get hurt, frustrated, and resentful when those things do not turn out as we expect them to be. Even though the meeting ground where we meet God and receive His love, it is also the place where we most feel alone. We have to let go of many of our insecurities and pretensions in order to see, accept, and embrace who we truly are in the eyes of God. We have to stand naked and as we are before God, and that scares the heck out of us! Nevertheless, this is caused by our failure to completely be honest, vulnerable, transparent, and in touch with the truth and reality. The failure to live with and in the truth often becomes the cause of our own negative feelings of loneliness because we would rather choose to live in a fantasized version of what we would like to be. As our society becomes more consumeristic and secularized, all of our supportive roots and systems are being cut, perverted, and brought into

question. Yet, all these cutting-edge rebuttals and denials of traditions and supportive values make us more lost and without any anchors to hold on against the storms of life.

That is why we need one another. When we are able to be genuine, honest, and transparent with each other, the sharing of our pains and sufferings, fears and worries, helps to make us freer, and at the same time, supportive of those who are walking with us. When we listen to each other and help each other discern the truth, we recognize that others' pains and worries are similar to ours as well. This communion of trust sheds light into the depths and complexities of our own mysterious hearts that we might not be able to understand ourselves. These true stories from the heart are also the story of our hearts. When we listen to one another with respect, we reveal something sacred, intimate, and personal, and this helps us see the divine love that God has put into each and every one of our souls. Our heartfelt stories reveal to us the presence of the loving heart of God and His understanding of our hearts and their pains and sufferings, as well as its loving hope and desire for a deeper faith. Those who come together recognize among them the common struggles to seek the face of God, to break through the uncertain clouds of loneliness, the manipulative and controlling lies of this world, and to come to the full meaning of life found in the One who loves us.

We recognize that when we turn ourselves from God, it often leads us to much internal disharmony, hence a distorted view of reality, which causes distrust, jealousy, and violence as we become more self-centered, losing focus on what is important and life-giving. When we lose trust in one another, we could no longer be comfortable and genuine to each other, hence necessary to protect ourselves, which leads to the *mélange* of sins and failures like selfishness and pride, exploitation and manipulation, jealousy and greediness, dishonesty and lack of openness, prejudice and

unfair judgments, lacks of respect and humility. We do these things, not because we necessarily want to be off-putting and blatantly arrogant, but because we are too unsure of ourselves, and we just want to attract attention and impress others. When we refuse to be vulnerable before others, we end up building an ego-centered edifice to impress them. Yet, vulnerability is that space within which human beings can truly meet each other and speak the same language from the heart as we are -- without any pretension.

We do not want to be alone, but we are often too scared and refuse to be who we are – purely and simply. That is why we become each our own constructed tower of "me, myself, and I" and then wonder why nobody seems to understand or care about what we have done. Yet, this tower is just a facade to hide how lonely, self-conscious, and unsure of ourselves we really are! We alienate ourselves from each other because there is no longer any common respect and sacred space among us, for each person is too worried about himself or herself. Nevertheless, the antidote to isolation and loneliness lies in the path to intimacy and togetherness, in vulnerability and genuineness of spirit. Ultimately, nothing that we can build by ourselves and for ourselves will endure forever. Everything is simply vapor, a quick breath that comes into existence but is insubstantial and temporary.

If we spend our whole life trying to chase unfulfilled desires, no amount of achievement can ever satiate us. The emptiness is meant for the infinite love of God, who has created us for Himself! There is always a space within our heart of hearts that is empty and is much greater than we can ever imagine or be fulfilled in this lifetime. It is futile to quench a thirst in us that will not quench and to satiate a hunger that will not be fulfilled by any earthly or human means. Within each and every one of our hearts is a burning desire to meet God, who is our Creator. No created object or

person in this world, be they ever so wonderful, can ever fill this emptiness inside us for the everlasting Lover.

Therefore, the solutions to the pains of loneliness and isolation are founded on prayer as we ground ourselves in the love of God and our commitment to establish and nurture genuine and authentic relationships with those who are walking in faith. It begins with the radical trust in God and His divine providence, believing that He would bring all things to fulfillment by giving Him enough space and time to be God. We have to be willing to let go of our old ways and begin to think anew with, in, and through His love. We have to choose to overcome the innate and self-centered desires of pride, selfishness, greed, jealousy, and sin of all kinds as to live in a genuine covenant with the Lord and those who are called by Him. It is grounded in a realistic acceptance and honesty to live each and every moment of life as it really is, as a beautiful and passing gift.

Without the loving presence of God, nothing is ever completely right in our lives. Nevertheless, when we hear His voice, calling us by name, there is nothing else in this world that could ever bring such satisfaction and healing deep from within. We continue to chase after meaningless things until we hear, at the core of our being, the Almighty calling us by name. It is His voice that soothes our daily ups and downs with all their pains and sufferings and heals our ever-present feeling of loneliness. It is this intimacy that many people want desperately, and they chase after many wrong things to just feel it for a short while, but cannot because of our world and its temporality. We are called to be like the centurion who calls out to Him with faith, which we repeat every time before communion: "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." (cf. Matthew 8:8) Lord, we truly believe and want you...grant us the grace to experience your love given to us according to your will.

LESSON 3 FOR TIMES OF LONELINESS

Why are we Christians? What can Christ and His message do for us that the other religions could not do? Why do we need Him in our lives?

Jesus Christ came to show us that we shall not live and die alone. Our future is not in the uncertainty of Hades, Shoal, or Nirvana. He shows us that God hears our prayers and understands our sorrows. Our hunger for righteousness and thirst for the truth will be satisfied. Our desire for love will be fulfilled. The love of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – will liberate us from the lies of this world and our own self-created walls of loneliness. Evil cannot destroy this everlasting love, for He is love, and we are created in His image and likeness. We shall not be alone, for we are joined together in a fellowship of joy, a fraternity of love, and a genuine communion no one in this world has ever experienced before. The loneliness of this world is destroyed by the life of love in Him who loves us! While loneliness is often the emotional result of what is going on in life, our restlessness can often be a sign of a greater invitation for intimacy and love of the Lord.

It can be frightening at times because this desire of our heart is deep and full of mystery that many of us just want to try -- at all costs -- to ignore and avoid entering it deeply. Many times, we try to avoid journeying inward because we are too frightened of finding out who we are, afraid because we must be honest and vulnerable, on edge because we must make the journey alone, fearful of the necessary solitude and perseverance needed, and reserved because we are called to enter the unknown. This journey is beyond our ego-centered desire to be in control, and it sometimes involves unveiling the pains from the past that we have chosen to ignore for a very long time. It is painful because we must be able to see ourselves as we truly are, in all our gifts and blessings, hurts and

brokenness. It takes courage -- great courage -- to let go of our comfort zone, natural defensive mechanisms, and the pristine facade that we have built to protect our fragile pride. It requires the laying down of ourselves -- a certain death to self -- in order to seek life deeper than what we imagine it to be. St. Augustine beautifully reminds us of this cathartic great journey: "To fall in love with God is the greatest of romances; to seek Him the greatest adventure; to find Him, the greatest human achievement."

Therefore, when we stray away from God, we experience the foretaste of hell and its loneliness that results from pride, selfishness, and sin. Hell (on this earth) is nothing more than the place where we have created for ourselves, cutting ourselves off from others, and retreating inside ourselves with only our pride and its fragile selfishness, putting up the false facade of flamboyant for-shows, and manipulation for companionship. Yet, God desires to save us from our own miserable state of life by calling us to live within His own very life of Trinitarian love and to be at the eternal banquet with those who are sincere and seeking the same everlasting love. We are called to embrace the infinite love of God, to live in communion with Him now through the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity until we return to Him after a lifelong journey of perseverance. We become (genuinely) more of ourselves when we are most in love! Life is most meaningful when we are able to reach through to someone, to see and touch him or her, and to know that the other person is just as real as we are. Life is the most beautiful when we can shut down and cut through the veils and barriers, lies and fantasies, shadows and unrealities which separate us from one another as to see and feel the truth as real as we are.

As human beings, made in the image and likeness of God, we are born to participate in the richness of His very life. The only thing that can give us full happiness and completion is our full communion with Him as to live in His love. Loneliness is our innate and subconscious yearning for

Him who created us. It is His way of drawing us to the life for which we were made. He leaves within us an insatiable thirst that forces us to seek and yearn for Him. That is why we remain unfulfilled and frustrated when we try to fill ourselves with lesser things. This desire is like an innate blueprint and guiding light, constantly telling us where we should be going to seek real meaning and fulfillment in life.

Just as we are built to be in union with the divine, we are also called to be in communion with one another and with all of reality. Our whole life and faith journey is a series of invitations and opportunities for us to find a personal and proper response to be in a genuine, honest, and transparent relationship with God and others. No amount of pleasure or sensual satisfaction, partying and drinking, fame and fortune, success or creativity, even no amount of genuine human love and affection can ever fully take our loneliness away. All of these things, even though they might sound good, God has made our hearts and their thirst bigger than them. Our loneliness is His magnet, pulling us back to His love. It reminds us that this is not our final destination. In a very creative (but frustrating at times) way, our desire for God and its loneliness keep us from being too occupied and settled with lesser goods. Look back to your and my lives, whenever we feel too comfortable with something, there is a small stillness that irks us deep from within, to keep us moving and eager for something greater. It keeps us growing and learning to let go in order to hold on to the divine. Only the total, all-encompassing, intimate, and personal union with Him can put to rest our deeply rooted loneliness.

Therefore, when we see those who are in pain or struggling in life without a real answer, when we see them trying to fill themselves with everything but still unhappy, we can recognize, understand, and be empathetically compassionate with them. It is easy to be behind a tough, popular, successful, or powerful facade to hide our fears and their pains;

yet, underneath it all, we remain the ever-scared and lonely people we have always been. We are not in control after all. All we really want is for others to love and accept us, and any facade we try to put on fools no one, least of all, ourselves. That is why it is important to choose to find and practice love and forgiveness. Sometimes those two qualities are hard and can come with tears. Nonetheless, if we never experienced pain and hurt, it would be all too easy to become selfish. The experiences of rejection, betrayal, and the like make it difficult to protect ourselves behind our own protected walls. Through our pains and discomfort, we are reminded to overcome and break down many of the barriers of selfishness and pride that hurt one another and prevent us from relating to God and others in a real, loving way.

Even though the many things and people who are important in our lives are immeasurable, they also remind us that we cannot over-expect them to be everything for us, to make us happy, and to provide for all of our needs, desires, and yearnings. We cannot treat them as things or objects that are owed to us or can be used as we like. Instead of seeing them for who they truly are, gifts in themselves, we often take them for granted, put too many demands on them, expect too much from them, and – at times – abuse or manipulate them to get what we want. This communal interaction and interpersonal dimension are important in our own spiritual journey because they remind us of the importance of our relationship with God through one another. Only when we are willing to be open and take the potential risk to let someone love (and even hurt) us, we will always put up a wall and hide behind our insecure facade. The person who is vulnerable is a person who cares enough to let himself or herself be weak as to be real in caring and loving. If we are not ready, we can turn against one another through weapons of war, objects of envy, and forces that serve to create jealousy and alienation among ourselves. True intimacy

and love can only be achieved when we stop focusing on our own self-centeredness and be vulnerable, and be able to accept and enrich one another's lives through authentic friendship and compassionate care of others. If we are not honest and genuine with other people, we are not vulnerable enough to be loved.

True love reminds us that it is more than a physical pleasure exchange, sharing a house, being together because of circumstantial situations, or more than being bound together by an attraction. It begins with the willingness to share and bear all things through the genuine gift of ourselves in sorrows and joys, sickness and health, growths and challenges, life and death. The Lord Jesus Christ shows us the immense power of this love. He gave us a real example with His own life, the one that manifests radical love through self-sacrifice -- even to crucifixion. Our Savior showed us that true love cannot be had for any lesser price tag except the loving and sacrificial heart of the One who genuinely loves us! There is no other route to truly love except one that gives with a great sense of commitment, surrendering, and dying for something greater than self-created isolation, loneliness, and pity. It is a personal decision to face up and accept it as part of our humanity, especially to stop letting it lead us into a life of negativity and self-destruction, but knowing that this in-depth desire of the heart is an invitation to greater love.

All these invitations about love are important, but to truly love as the Lord does is not easy. There will be a lot of starting over, and there are no quick shortcuts to love! However, if we persevere and continue to choose to love, this habitual lifestyle change will give us a greater degree of consolation to put our desire to be loved into a creative and life-giving force to care and love like He does. Love moves us to choose true freedom instead of emotional compulsion, spiritual restfulness instead of psychological restlessness, patience instead of control, genuine altruism

rather than greediness, authentic friendship rather than possessive codependency, and compassionate empathy instead of manipulative apathy. As Christians, we choose to love in both words and actions, in prayers and with our daily sacrifices. Our egocentric fantasy is broken by prayer because it grounds us in deeper contact with God, in knowing who He is and being content with His loving will for us. Without a doubt, when we listen to Him in prayer, much of our loneliness and its pains from our illusions, which we suffer, will dissolve.

When we seek to love and live our lives beyond our own, to the extent of how much we are willing to give ourselves wholeheartedly, we help one another move toward the everlasting, never-changing, life-giving love of God that changes everything. With that in mind, I would like to close with the words of the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard: "God creates [the universe] out of nothing. Wonderful, you say. Yes, to be sure, but He does what is still more wonderful: He makes saints out of sinners." Indeed, He does. I am one of them trying to seek and love Him more each day.

LESSON 1 ON SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND MATURITY

There are so many spiritual writers and speakers out there... and to be honest with you, I would be very confused as to who to trust if I were an ordinary person who has little theological or spiritual foundations. It has become very hard to try to understand which one is actually writing and speaking the truth. Nowadays, we see many who speak about positive self-image to become the best version of ourselves, while others seem to speak in very condemnatory, condescending, and demeaning ways. So, with all the different talks and perspectives on the spiritual life, which one are we supposed to listen to and follow? How are we supposed to grow, and who are we called to become? What does it mean to become the best version of ourselves? I think these are all valid questions to be raised, and it is important to understand who we are and what we are called to be, or else we might end up trying too hard to be someone other than ourselves. If that is to happen, even though we might get what we want objectively, we will forever be lost, empty, and unhappy until we grow, mature, and become what God wants of us.

First, let us affirm the essential foundation. Without any doubt, all (valid) Christian spiritual writers need to help us to become more like Christ in our words and actions, life and deeds. Everything that is taught to us and prayerfully received by us needs to help us to become more Christlike and less of the world. We are to study and personalize in our very own selves what it means to become sons and daughters of God the Father through our very own imitation of the Lord's own life, under the tender guidance and formation of the Holy Spirit. That is the goal, and particular means should be a discernment between the individual and his or her spiritual director! Why? We are all unique because each and every one of us is given different gifts, as well as backgrounds, strengths, blessings, limitations, and weaknesses.

Hence, the first and most important step in our spiritual life is to understand who we truly are as children of God our Father, disciples of Christ Jesus, and instruments of the Holy Spirit with our very own gifts and blessings, as well as our woundedness and hurts. We all have our own baggage that has been created, given, or transferred to us by past events. Therefore, it is important to see ourselves as we truly are, beloved in His eyes, without having to justify ourselves or trying to become someone else. This is extremely hard because we have to be honest with ourselves and shed away the lies, facades, and excuses that we have made for ourselves to be accepted, recognized, or lovable in other people's eyes.

For me, in my own spiritual journey and healing, I had to learn to unapologetically love myself as I was meant to be. With that unpretentious self-love, I had to begin to let go, forgive, and love those who were and are in my life, too. My spiritual directors taught me to love those who are also hurt because each and every one of us has our own core wounds that we bear and carry. I was taught to love the person beyond the words and actions they could subconsciously or defensively do in order to protect their fragile ego. This does not mean that everything is going to be rosy and all nice! I still struggle in trying to love others, yet I have learned that there is a big difference between love and like. While I might not like or find this person's attitudes or actions, sometimes to a high degree, I have learned not to let my raw emotions and feelings dictate and turn me into a vengeful person. While I might struggle to respond and be kind in the presence of such people and to love them humanly speaking, my true love for them never stopped, since it never ends. I have to personally and intentionally choose to love, even though the natural temptations and tendencies are to seek retribution, beginning in prayers and small creative steps to embrace (the person) and let go (the hurts or things beyond control).

This whole process is our very own kenosis - self-emptying - in intimation of the Lord's own kenosis when 1) He chose to become one of us, 2) to live like us in all things but sin, 3) and to give Himself totally and completely to us even when it meant to accept death on the Cross. Even though we all know what He had done for us and what He is asking of us, letting go of our own desires to be in control, egocentric love, and wanting things to be our way are very hard and personal. It is extremely hard not to try to become another (humanistic) version of ourselves, the one we would have liked, but empty our desires to be self-centered and in control to truly become who we truly are in all of our brokenness and imperfections. It hurts to let go and to love ourselves as we truly are, because, in all honesty, we do not like ourselves in all of our vulnerabilities and deficiencies. It is so egocentrically "natural" to be someone else "better" or "more" than who we truly are, and very humbling to love our genuine, transparent, and vulnerable selves.

We all want to present or see ourselves in another image that pets our ego, because it makes us feel good, avoid the past, or look better than who we truly are, but that is nothing more than self-dependency. By emptying ourselves of all pretenses, excuses, and unnecessary layers and add-ons, we will be able to be more open, dependent, and humble enough to receive His grace to reform, transform, and lift us higher than our own self-imposed limits.

That is why true humility, perseverance, and trust through the genuine self-emptying process are extremely hard. It is humbling to understand and be able to embrace the reality that we do not have to be perfect in order to be good and loved by God. Contrary to what the world and what our ego likes, the greatest lesson learned is the lesson of letting go of ourselves and letting God be God for us. If we can stop being childish and self-centered and become more childlike and trusting, we will

personally understand what it means to be joyful, content, and freed from what this world has been lying, manipulating, and trying to enslave us.

Whoever we have made ourselves to be or whatever we think we are, do not be afraid to lay them all down at His feet. Do not be afraid to shed our false persona and self-made image as we come to Him. Do not be afraid to love ourselves as we are, in all our grace-filled brokenness and imperfections, so that we can truly give and offer the gift of ourselves as we are to those who are around us. This is the hard way, but this is the only way that we can truly be free and genuine with who we are. We are loved, and by His grace, we will overcome every lie that tells us who we are not or as someone else except as God's beloved.

Unless we let go, we can never have the freedom to open ourselves up to receive something greater than what we can comprehend or see at this moment. It is hard to be vulnerable, genuine, and transparent with ourselves and to love ourselves in our brokenness and all our imperfections. Yet, unless we do this, we will never know who we are except to continue to lie and dupe ourselves into loving a different version of who we think we are or what we would like to be. The Lord taught us to love by the selfless, genuine, and personal gift of ourselves in loving others. He taught us to love and to continue to love, even when others want to hurt us or have hurt us. He gave us the ultimate answer to all of this world's evils and hurts by overcoming evil with Him! Instead of doing what would seem to be natural and human by taking things into our own hands and dealing with matters that would be comfortable to us, we are called to discern, reflect, pray, and take the route of the self-donation way of love that the Lord Jesus had chosen to save the world.

Each and every one of us will have to go through our own pruning process to grow, but it is also important to remember that it is not just a

one-time matter! We will constantly be formed, reformed, and transformed by His grace because worldly matters and self-centered desires will find their ways to cling to us again. We will have to be trimmed, pruned, cultivated, and enriched with different means and different times in order to properly fight off diseases and sicknesses, matters that will affect and destroy us, as well as to find opportunities to grow and mature in His love.

Therefore, do not be afraid to let go, slowly discover, grow, and mature in what He calls you and me to be! We are unique and different, and everything that we have today has been providential and grace-filled opportunities of His love. We do not have to be ashamed of our past, brokenness, or mistakes; we only have to know that God has the ability to draw straight from crooked lines, transform our baggage into opportunities for growth, and reform us to become more genuine, transparent, and real with who we truly are deep from within. It is scary and humbling at first because we will be so used to what we have learned and accrued with time, but if we let go, empty ourselves, and let Him fill us with His gentle, loving, and transformative grace, we will discover the true freedom and joy that this world will never be able to afford us!

LESSON 2 ON SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND MATURITY

In the last chapter, I talked about the importance of our desire to let go of ourselves, empty our desires to be in control, or wanting to glorify ourselves in order to become more like Christ. Conversion leads to trust, and trust leads to deeper and sacrificial love, confidence in knowing that we are truly free in being disciples of Christ Jesus, sons and daughters of God our Heavenly Father, and instruments of the Holy Spirit. Without a doubt, knowing WHO we are called to be is important, but it is also important to follow up that heartfelt commitment with a real, practical, habitual, and personal life of prayer. Without prayer, we will relapse, lose our focus, and be pulled by worldly lies and manipulations. Without prayer, we will never find the time to rest in the Lord and to receive His loving grace.

The life of prayer, therefore, does not come naturally. It has to be developed, committed, and habitual! It means that we have to make time, desire to learn to deepen our commitment to pray, and fine-tune different ways to lift up our hearts to God in the different moments and seasons of life. There are many ways to pray, but none of them will be helpful, impactful, or personally life-changing, life-giving, and life-transformative unless we learn, grow, and mature in our own spiritual life. We can pray as a community of faith through Mass and the different liturgies of the Church. We can pray personally through oral, meditative, or reflective prayer styles. They are all helpful at different times and situations, and that is why knowing the different styles and methods - as well as ourselves - helps us find personal ways to lift up our hearts and unite ourselves to Him in the different moments of life.

Inside the cloistered garden of the Carmelite Sisters in Patzun, Guatemala, there is a big lettered phrase that reminds visitors and the

sisters that "It is better to speak to God than to speak about God." As Carmelites, their spirituality is one of contemplation and prayer, but as missionaries, they are also called to evangelize and preach the Gospel to the poor. This phrase reminds them that they are to pray and have a close, intimate, and personal relationship with God first before they can speak about Him to others. It reminds them that even though they will preach Him to others, it is still better (and very important) that they spend the time to contemplate and pray so that they can listen to what He has to say to them. I find this foundational reminder balanced and important so that they preach the Gospel and not themselves, and they share Jesus Christ, not their own abilities or attractive qualities.

We, too, must be reminded that it is important to deepen and strengthen our relationship with the Lord first before we can speak about Him. There are too many people who easily say that they know about God but have never taken the time to pray and learn about His love. There are too many people who know much about what the Scriptures say or what the Catechism teaches, but they are scared of coming to prayer with a humble, genuine, and trusting heart that truly speaks and listens to the One who loves them. It is hard! Yet, our genuine prayers require the gift of our very own self to Him as to trust, be opened, and willingly embrace all things with the firm resolve to do what is right and just (according to His standards, teachings, and examples), not just what is appealing or beneficial for us.

Our willingness to believe and have faith through prayer at times will take us from our own comfort zone, especially the things we have been so used to or built up for ourselves and others to see, into the desert of trials and temptations - even the uncomfortable nothingness. Yet, when we look back at our own lives, we see that we grow, mature, and find our true foundations in God on the personal level in and through those

moments. Perhaps we do not want to hear this, but only when everything that we have grown used to is taken away or not available, do we become more focused on WHO is life-giving. In letting go of what is not important to our faith and its spiritual journey toward God, we hold on to WHAT is important. Facing temptation is not easy; going through trials is hard and discouraging at times! We will be shaken, question, or doubt God's goodness, but if we just take the time to see, we will discover that we are not alone. He is always with us in and through the temptations and hardships because the desert is not the end; it is simply a transition stage and a place of purification toward the final destination. In our trials and hardships, in our daily struggles with temptations and deceitful attacks of the Devil, we will learn and become stronger when we abide and stay close to the Lord. All the saints went through temptations, and they all had to learn how to fight off the one who deceives and lies; hence, they learned how to sanctify and purify their thoughts and desires through prayerful commitment and trust in Him who loves them. Therefore, let us, too, remember that "it is better to speak to God than to speak about God." Let us never stop praying, even though it hurts and is dry at times.

To know begins with the ability to listen and be humble, honest, transparent, and vulnerable to God and to ourselves! We cannot pretend or make excuses... We can only seek to be healed, loved, and transformed as we are. We can only be who God wants us to be instead of what others want from us. All of my life, I had found myself distraught, negative, or on the edge of being burnt out, pushed people away, and isolated myself when I could not be honest with who I am in His eyes. I lost my way when I was trying hard to win the favor of others, trying to be in control, or allow others to tell me who I am. Only in surrendering myself as I am - broken, imperfect, but loved by God - did I allow myself to accept love as it is instead of only focusing on how it should be. Only in radical abandonment

of my petty will and desire to have things my way did I find out that His grace is enough for me!

I have seen so many people coming to me, asking how to be happy, but they are not willing to let go in order to be content. They want to find true peace, but they are not willing to surrender their control in order to be totally dependent on God and to become what He wants from them. Too many people are too worried about having this or that thing, knowing this or that person, being affirmed or be told by this or that matter to be happy; however, we are not really happy until we let go of lesser things or people telling us what they want from us out of codependency instead of what the Almighty desires of us out of love.

Therefore, find some time to learn about prayer, especially by learning from the saints and spiritual masters! Instead of spending time searching, swiping, or scrolling through more meaningless stuff, find the time to learn to develop good personal spiritual habits that will enrich our own journey of faith. In all things, especially in our own personal prayer times, ask ourselves the honest question, "Who does God say that I am?" Do I really know? If I do not, am I willing to learn and seek to understand who I am in Him? We can all begin the journey in letting go, going out of our comfort zone, in order to seek, understand, and embrace ourselves as we are in God. It is scary and challenging at times, but we are not alone. Do not be afraid to seek help from others around us as well, especially those who are wise in spiritual matters! All we can ever do is be honest, transparent, and humble in seeking help beyond the typical, redundant, recurring, and apparent issues that give no life nor have any substance. Let us try our best to be perfect in loving and dependent on the Almighty – one step at a time.

LESSON 3 ON SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND MATURITY

Too many people get frustrated when they want to change their lives and be better, but they keep falling back into the same habitual sins and weaknesses that are hard to shake off. They found a personal, deep conviction to change their lives and leave their old ways behind. Even though they can (initially) start strong, sooner or later, old habits begin to creep back in again. So many end up being so frustrated with themselves, especially having to go to confession for the same sins over and over again, that they want to give up because they think they are not worthy to be loved by God. Nonetheless, true spiritual growth and maturity lie in our very own desire to be humble, trust in Him, and continue to persevere.

Hence, I want to affirm an information foundation for those who are planning for the long run, willing to accept the natural ups and downs, moments of failure and grace, and keep trusting in God even when it gets hard. Good spiritual habits are necessary to habituate and prepare the soul for the spiritual life and its lessons! Read it again... This foundational rule teaches us that we need to reflect, discern, and find practical ways to create and practice good habits to overcome past or current habitual ones.

Take some time to think about it... In order for us to overcome one deeply ingrained and long-time bad habit that we subconsciously, likely, "naturally," or personally turn to, we need to be consciously aware, personally willing, and attentively practicing (at least) one or two practical habits. Of course, there will be easy as well as challenging times, moments when things seem easier as well as ones that seem to be very hard to overcome, but we must not give up! Just like a good athlete or someone who is trying to learn and grow from each moment or opportunity, we can all fine-tune and learn from our mistakes. We do not

give up just because we failed or did not get what we hoped for. We step back, humble ourselves, and allow our failures and weaknesses to teach us, especially how to continue to trust in God and persevere with His loving grace.

Without a doubt, when we try to change our lives and ask for help, the Devil will do his best to dismiss us, filling us with negative falsehood and despairing manipulations, making us lose heart and want to give up. This is the truth! Look back in our own lives and see when the Liar, Manipulator, and Coward attack us?!? He and his minions have all the time in the world to study our habits and actions, waiting for us to be weak and attack when we are least expected and unprepared. He pounded us with what seemed to be devastating and knock-out blows, but he is nothing good or better than who he actually is -- a coward -- who is petty, small-minded, miserable, and desperate to attack and hurt others so he and his minions are not the only ones who are self-centeredly miserable. Therefore, we can fight against his cheap attacks by using the only weapon that he does not possess, which is humility to know who we are as to depend on God, and seek help from others because we have recognized that we cannot help ourselves.

As Catholics, we believe in second chances, that God forgives and gives us sufficient grace to overcome our failures, hurts, pains, sufferings, and tormenting past. Our sins, failures, and whatever we have done in the past do not define or enslave us for eternity if we are humble enough to confess our sins, ask for forgiveness, seek conversion, and truly be repentant of our faults. We might be scarred by them or have to answer for the crimes or faults we have committed in a just way, but we are given the grace to overcome and seek new beginnings if we truly resign to Him, seek His forgiveness, especially to seek new lives of faith in through genuine conversion, repentance, atonement, and freedom. If we are truly sorry for

our failures, He will forgive us as well as give us sufficient grace to amend our lives and seek a new future in His loving grace and with His providential care through various means and people. No one will be forgotten if he or she returns to God, be reconciled with Him through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and do his or her best to change. Of course, we will relapse and fail at times, but this is where perseverance and tenacity come in and help us not to lose focus, give up on hope, and abandon the course when things get hard.

Of course, this world is always trying its best to distract, make us worry, and plant distrust, division, and doubt in our minds to get us away from God's real love and His goodness. That is why, through mature and prayerful discernment (learned through trials and errors), we learn to fight the spiritual battle against the different forces and spirits well with the courage found in the Lord and His faithful love. Hence, the ultimate goal of the spiritual life is knowing who we really are and Who really loves us and wills our good so that when we are lost, we learn to be honest, prayerfully recognize, humbly discern, and courageously return to the One who nourishes us. Do not be afraid to return to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and allow the sacramental grace to empower us to grow and mature! We might not always see our progress and result right away, but if we persevere -- one step at a time -- we will be able to see unexpected change through consistency.

We are survivors because we choose to be strong against the Devil's cheap attacks that fill us with despair, hopelessness, and falsehood because he attacks our pride, self-dependency, and inconstancy. Please always remember that we have always been, and we will continue to be, with God's grace! There will be hard days, and there will be times when we might think that we might not survive or see another day. We are still here... but not because of our own abilities and efforts,

but because of His grace as well. There were moments in life when we thought we could not make it or that it was too hard, but we are still here because of His grace. It is very easy to begin strong and full of energy, but it is important to be consistent, persevere, and keep our focus on God and our spiritual journey! I really do not have any other secret (and cannot emphasize this enough) except to reaffirm with you that consistent, genuine, and humble practice of good spiritual habits helps us be focused on Him for the life-long spiritual journey.

Take some time to reflect, especially when things were thought to be impossible and we were about to give up or give in. There seemed to be some unexplainable source of strength that pushed us through... and that was His grace. Therefore, we continue on, moving forward, pushing on days, too, one step at a time. We stay the course because life is worth living and full of grace, even though it might be full of trials and hardships at times. There will be stormy days just as there are sunny ones. Some days will be discouraging and hard, but do not give up, for we are survivors, and He has redeemed us. We are given second chances and opportunities to be better, no matter how hard or challenging life is in certain periods. Therefore, let us not give up hope yet! Let us not be defined and enslaved in our own hellish reality because of our failures, but really push forward, to desire, will, seek, and embrace change for the better with all humility and genuineness of heart. My brothers and sisters, let us try our best to keep and stay the course.

LESSON 4 ON SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND MATURITY

The saints taught us that in our nothingness and total dependency on God, we share the spiritual wealth that comes from Him, the wealth that this world can never understand or obtain by its own powers or manipulations. By our total dependence on the Almighty, we are able to be comfortable with one another without being bogged down by conflicts, disputes, enmities, vanity, pride, or the desire to manipulate or dominate others.

As Christians living in the world, we try our best to continue to be who we are, carrying on what the Master has done in His own life, even though our words and actions might not always be welcomed and accepted with joy. The saints remind us that our true joy is found in the Lord as we are able to participate in His providential care for the people. We are the people of hope -- hope in Him -- so our joy cannot be diminished by the apparent trials that are in front of us. Our love and devotion to God are clearly seen and purely received when we generously give ourselves and allow His gifts to be at work in and through us. Our prayers, words, and actions then become the intimate expressions of who we really are.

When a spiritual director asks a person to love himself or herself. It means that we are called to learn how to love our true self, made in the image and likeness of God, worthy of love because He wills and loves it into being. Oftentimes, we like to hide our brokenness, what was given, imposed, perverted, or picked up along the way. This brokenness is complex and different for each person, but it is often the result of humanistic, social, manmade lies, perversion, manipulation, hurt, and the like. Ironically, many of us do not think we are lovable, and we try to hide it in many different ways! Our fragile ego then perverted this reality by hiding it behind all of the false facades and security layers that it has built up for

itself in order to be more outwardly liked, accepted, or in control. Nonetheless, true spiritual freedom comes when we are able to love ourselves in all our blessings and brokenness so we can truly receive the fullness of the love God has for us.

To be able to love ourselves as we truly are, in all our "ugliness" -- the things we do not like about ourselves -- is extremely hard! It is easier to love ourselves as we like to be, but it is only cathartic when we are able to love ourselves as we are deep from within. It is hard to understand that we do not have to put on a false self to receive God's love, nor do not need to look outside of ourselves for other things or people to receive His love. When we are frustrated, angry, or resentful at life and others, it is oftentimes a result of our decisions to put unrealistic conditions on God, others, or ourselves. We talk much about divine love being unconditional, but too many times, we have allowed ourselves to put too many expectations, demands, or conditions on His unconditional love. We want things this or that way, and we are not happy to simply receive His infinite, eternal, and everlasting love.

All these diverse feelings of restlessness, emptiness, longing, alienation, paranoia, loneliness, guilt, shame, and the like are both painful confusion and creative tension. They are there to remind us that we are humans, emotionally alive and well, but we cannot save ourselves. There are things that we cannot solve ourselves because there is a spot in us that will not be filled, a thirst that cannot be quenched, and a hunger that cannot be satisfied by any human or social means. We can rationalize and try to control them, yet continue to be unhappy and cynical as we try to force ourselves to do fruitless and tiring things to the soul, but the abiding pains are still there. When undealt with, these things make us into not very beautiful people who are constantly complaining, forming unfair judgments, and seeing the world in a negative and distorted way because

we try to rationalize and control everything our way. We play games with others, it breaks down relationships, isolates, makes us tired, sours our attitudes, destroys our freedom, and makes us repulsive. Sadly, these things enslave us because we end up doing things that are no longer really expressive of our true selves. We become powerless to be our own person because we are locked in our own created hell. Loneliness and its pains make us locked up in our own emotional, psychological, and even physical handicaps through rejection, separation, and or anything else that could possibly invite genuine intimacy and interpersonal love.

Many people go through life frustrated and restless, because they let their raw energies push them from one direction to the next, never able to be content or settle down, not willing to take the time to reflect, discern, and pray about what they are called to do, nor have enough discipline to achieve the ends all of us are meant to attain in the eyes of God. These are the basic causes of a self-inflicted desolation through spiritual sloth and a narrow-visioned understanding of reality. As complex yet confusing human beings, it is very easy to become infatuated with certain things, hung up on certain people, nostalgic about certain past people or events, and caught up in unrealistic daydreams and fantasies. Nonetheless, all these things make us lose focus on the present moment to truly give ourselves to the event and the people who are present in our lives. Even though we want to be possessive of relationships, we cannot genuinely and dutifully give ourselves totally; we put on a facade of presence to play along or to get what we want, but still go home and be alone. Too many people want everything or more than what they can actually receive or give genuinely, hence ending up with nothing except their own self that is hurt. It is important to know that we cannot have it all, for every sincere choice and relationship is a necessary limitation to other competing goods.

We are complex human beings with many hurts, pieces of baggage, and past items hanging onto our souls, but we are also loved by God in all of our brokenness and imperfection. The real question is whether we are able to love ourselves as we are, and to allow the grace of God to be at work in us in all its fullness?!? His divine grace can only change us if we are willing to be changed, not as we like things to be with our humanistic, temporary, and ego-centered conditions, but with a trusting, content, and peaceful heart knowing that He wills our well-being. Tranquility is grounded in the simplicity of heart and personal contentment with what we currently have in the fullness of God's grace! Perhaps to truly be at peace with ourselves begins with us stop trying to chase after things to fill up our schedule, prove ourselves, or to avoid loneliness, but to simply receive, embrace, love, and be content with what He is giving us. We are called to be childlike in faith and prayer, to love and trust in what the good God has given to us. This is the secret to holiness and our spiritual life... To receive all things given to us by Him with gratitude, contentment, and simplicity of heart as we are able, and to return everything we have received in genuine and loving service of others as we are where He has placed us.

The amount of grace one can receive depends on how much one is willing to be honest and humble to receive. It is important to remember that God gives to each person differently and appropriately, so it is proper not to be demanding and get frustrated with what could have been, should have been, or would have been for us. God gives, we give thanks. If He does not give as we hope, we trust in knowing that His gift is appropriate at this time and that His love is enough for us. The end goal of spiritual direction is not to be able to get what we wanted or hoped for but to be content, abide, and trust in the essential and life-giving relationship that the Lord has and willed for us. For that to happen, we have to peel off all the things

that we have built for ourselves to see ourselves as we truly are, deep from within. It then leads to the healing and cathartic step of loving oneself in all its brokenness and imperfections as God loves us. The journey will lead us to, then, better discern, reflect, and pray about what is going on in our own lives as to live a childlike faith that trusts and loves instead of being childish with demanding or selfish expectations.

We all begin small, but with perseverance, courage, and humility -- as well as time and patience, God is able to bring into fulfillment what He has begun in us if we trust in Him. We will definitely go through many blessings and struggles, trials and hardships, as well as moments of loving grace, but God is always with us. Just as we need to train ourselves physically to tone and strengthen our muscles, our soul and its spirit have to be holistically exercised in conjunction with our humanity to truly mature and be rounded with what He wants us to be. We have to be willing, yet patient, to activate the gifts and understand the lessons that God has for us at each stage of the journey as to overcome the obstacles that are present or have presented themselves to us.

Let us not, therefore, forget our universal call to holiness and to live as Christ did, not only for ourselves for the greater good and sanctification of this world. Through our genuine gift of faith, we are able to lift one another up and help each other along the way. We are all sinners who are trying each day to be more holy by conforming our lives to Christ Jesus and allowing His loving grace to change us deep from within. Of course, there will be challenging days with their obstacles, hardships, and trials along the way, but as long as we fix our eyes on Him, we can live for Him and with Him. Thus, let us not be scared to be holy and try our best to become saints in our own journey of faith so we can radiate His love to others and help them along their journey as well. May our God be our everything, and Heaven, our true homeland and final destination.

LESSON 5 ON SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND MATURITY

In one of his sermons, St. Peter Chrysologus once said, “It is intolerable for love not to see the object of its longing. That is why whatever reward they merited was nothing to the saints if they could not see the Lord. A love that desires to see God may not have reasonableness on its side, but it is the evidence of filial love.” Hence, the saint was able to capture in a few lines why the saints were so passionately in love with God, even though many people looked at them as being foolish.

I believe too many people focus on the things that do not really matter in our ordinary and spiritual lives. And while we can spend a lot arguing about the theological, political, or ideological details and perspectives, not many people are willing to take the time to conform their lives to seek and live in the will of God. As a matter of fact, we love to talk, discuss, argue, or blame one another on things that seem to be “important” but do not impact or matter for our very own life of discipleship, conversion, and spiritual journey. If we can spend useless time arguing about our differences and perspectives on things, how much time have we spent in contemplative prayer and selfless service of our neighbors?

When we lack the love of God within us, we tend to allow our ego to be in control and guide our thoughts, words, and actions. Nonetheless, when we seek, understand, and live in the love that He has for us, our egocentric reservations and fears are removed and replaced with mutual love, respect, and forgiveness so we can accompany, preserve, and participate in the shared labor that enriches the Lord’s vineyards. It is love that lifts us up from our own humanistic ruckus and fears to live a life of genuine worship and service.

God, throughout salvation history, called the ones He chose out of their own comfort zone and to grow where He led them. Even though they each had their own reservations, they confronted their fears and embraced the mission given to them. There were times they had to wrestle with the Lord and His will for them, but they were not afraid of the One who was faithful to them, even when they were conflicted within themselves and struggled to make sense out of life. His love invited them to be free from the lies, manipulations, and enslavement to matters of this world so they can become genuine testimonies and witnesses that lead others to true freedom as well.

The Almighty raised up many hopeless people, preserved His faithful from the corruptions of the world, and forgave them when they failed. There were times when the biblical characters, as well as the saints, struggled to find peace in the midst of their hardships and sufferings. God gave them the necessary grace to endure the calamities and consulted them with true hope for the future. He never took their trials and hardships away, but led them through everything with divine strength. He walked with those whom He chose in foreign, dangerous, and challenging lands, and with His supernatural grace, taught them to love their persecutors and accusers rather than to be locked up by resentment, fear, or defensive measures.

Even though we are still wounded by our sinfulness and weaknesses, we are filled with His sufficient grace to overcome our woundedness in order to rise above our failures and shortcomings. This, of course, takes a lot of humility, prayer, attentiveness, and ability to contemplate, reflect, and discern the valuable life and spiritual lessons He has given us, even at times when things do not go our way or when we fail to really give him our genuine best, transparent humility, and grateful heart. When love becomes our true motivation and intention, we will be

able to rise above our very own self-centered concerns with what will be, ought to be, or what can be according to our limited understanding. The saints taught us that true love for the Lord motivates us to overcome all obstacles, hindrances, and hardships in order to persevere and remain with Him.

Of course, there will be days that we will question, doubt, and want to give up because life gets too messy, challenging, and hard to endure. However, if we fix our eyes on Him, we will find an unexplainable strength to hold on and give our all to the One who has our heart. At times, our narrowed vision will fail to apprehend God, but how can the Creator of the whole universe be understood when the whole world cannot contain Him!?! At times, we will want to give up and walk away, but we still stay because this flame of divine love enkindled our hearts and overtook every fiber of our being.

We see this in the very lives of our Savior Jesus Christ and of the Blessed Virgin Mary. His obedience on the Cross, to embrace all the shame, misunderstanding, pains, and sufferings inflicted upon Him by others, reversed the disobedience of Adam and Eve, who wanted to be like God in their punitive ways. Mary, too, believed and remained faithful to God throughout her whole life, even when it got very hard. To truly love and believe in His goodness and love for us, especially when things are falling apart, is very hard and challenging. The evil one will come in to lie, manipulate the situation, and tell us that we are alone, no one cares about us, and God has abandoned us. Nonetheless, those are the moments when we choose to remain faithful, abide with Him, and continue to live what He has called us to be instead of letting ourselves lose focus.

The life of discipleship consists of a delicate balance between passion and commitment, eros and agape in both of their basic,

substantial, and fundamental understanding. There will be times when we need to let our passion ignite and motivate us to feel His loving presence in a real and personal way. Nonetheless, there will also be times when we have to personally choose to will to love even though it makes no sentimental, emotional, humanistic, or natural sense. The act of the will and our passion interplay and help us to find different ways to love God in a personal way, as we are able!

There will be sunny as well as stormy days. There will be good weather as well as rough moments. There will be times of elation as well as times of little to nothing to offer. There will be mountains as well as valleys. Nonetheless, life changes, and it has its own different seasons. Nonetheless, to have true faith, hope, and love requires us to truly be focused on the Lord, longing for Him, seeking His presence, and continuing to abide with him when it gets hard.

That is why the spiritual life is hard. Hence, if we really read the saints' writings, autobiographies, and testimonies of their own spiritual journeys, we would definitely see the struggles they had to endure. None of them were perfect or lived without their own struggles and challenges! Nevertheless, they all struggled to love God and to choose Him above all else. They all had their moments of doubts, weaknesses, and failures, but they stayed. For us, too, we just have to remember that it is important to choose to love and keep on willing to love even when it gets hard. Truly, love is not just an emotion, feeling, or passing thought; it is a personal, intimate, and hard decision to make at times, too. Therefore, do not be afraid to love and remain in love!

As we close this five-part series on spiritual growth and maturity, I would like to leave you a quote from Fr. Pedro Arupe, SJ, who was once the

Superior General of the Society of Jesus, for you to reflect, pray, discern, and choose to love God:

"Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the mornings, what you will do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything."

May the Lord bless you and keep you. I hope this series helps you in a small way with your spiritual journey. May you and I recognize His love for us, even in the challenging moments of life. Please pray for me as I am for you, as we seek spiritual maturity and grow in our own particular faith journey.

LESSON 1 FROM PRAYING WITH THE SQUIRRELS

Setting

At Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, there is an old Jesuit who feeds the university squirrels daily with leftover morsels of bread and nuts, especially old cookies (their favorite treat). Every day around 6:00 pm, he comes out of the side door with a Ziploc full of leftovers from the religious community and university dining halls. Just as he opens the door, squirrels and sparrows from the Jesuit Garden and around the campus congregate to receive their meal from him. They know the exact time range, so they would begin to wait patiently for him – squirrels on one side, sparrows on the other. The old Jesuit would go around the Garden to feed all of the squirrels and birds at the different stations and housing of each squirrel and bird family. He knows his animals and they trust him... Thus, I began to follow the holy man as he feeds his squirrels and birds (carefully observing and reflecting while keeping my retreat silence) and befriended the interesting and unique squirrels of Creighton University. As time progressed, they began to trust in me (to the point of eating right next to me as I meditate) as I learn to see God, His love, and what He has to say through them.

Lesson

Because of his daily routine and since the old Jesuit has earned their trust – and it took him a long time to build that relationship – the animals of the Jesuit Garden learn to wait for his presence. In his simple daily feeding, he teaches them to trust in humans, to be contented and happy with their given portion (since he knows how much each one needs). They know that he will provide them with what they need as long as they keep their eyes on him. When he looks at them and when they, in return, look at him, only then will he throw the portion – and they all wait for their

turn. Thus, from one generation of animals to the next, they learn how to trust other humans who are at peace and come with goodwill and are cautious of people or things that can harm them or not of good will instinctively.

Reflection

God does the same thing to us if we look and recognize His presence in our lives. When we know and see Him gazing at us lovingly (and others that are from Him or like Him in spirit), we also learn how to trust and love others and approach with caution things that are not of Him.

Just like the university squirrels, our distorted nature is selfish and distrusting (even to the one who “feeds” and loves us) because we are defensively scared of being hurt, but He continues to feed you and I with loving mercy and compassion, patiently waiting and giving until the right time for us to see and trust in Him. O Lord, your loving patience slowly – but surely – changes my selfish and distrusting tendency altogether.

“Father, please let me see your loving presence in my life.”

Scriptural suggestions: Isaiah 43:1-7 and/or Psalm 139.

*** Please refer to pages 106-112 for St. Ignatius of Loyola’s two sets of the Rules of Discernment of Spirit. ***

Prayer Notes:

LESSON 2 FROM PRAYING WITH THE SQUIRRELS

Lesson

When the old Jesuit gives each squirrel his or her own appropriate portion, they stop fighting with each other and become content with what they have. If they keep their eyes on him, they will surely receive the appropriate portion, thus learning how to appreciate and receive instead of eyeing one another and fighting for food. He gives them the amount each one needs (because he knows his squirrels), and they trust him. Interestingly, when a smart squirrel digs a hole to hide his extras deep in the ground, thinking that it will be safe, other squirrels know and find it sooner or later.

Reflection

When we keep our eyes on God and look up to Him to receive what we need (gifts that are fitting and meaningful), we will receive true gifts out of loving care, thus becoming content beyond materialistic comparison and worries. When we keep our eyes on others' portions, we become self-pitied, selfish, jealous, and hating, wanting to get what others have and we do not, even to the point of hurting and stealing from others. That happens because of our egotistical and distorted nature after the Fall (because of our "original" and universal pride and selfishness), especially when we are too focused on materialism and/or forget what we have! Keep our eyes on God and appreciate His lessons and gifts that are beyond materialism, at the same time, filling our souls. Recognize, appreciate, and learn from Him, and we shall be filled deep down. Stop trying to "snatch" things from others out of self-pity, jealousy, and shallowness.

*"Father, please let me keep my eyes on you and rest in your love –
and not other things."*

Scriptural suggestions: Ezekiel 36:16-31 and/or Hosea 11:1-9.

Prayer Notes:

LESSON 3 FROM PRAYING WITH THE SQUIRRELS

Lesson

When a squirrel is happy and content with what it receives, it savors the morsels of food, letting things get digested slowly instead of gulping things down. There is just that joy and happiness (and the simple cuteness expressed) when they calmly enjoy their food. Thus, when these things happen, its system and memory naturally register the “happy” moment – not just the appetite alone, especially the face of the giver in its memories of “security,” so when the giver comes back, the squirrel learn how to recognize, be opened, and trust in that person. Sometimes, in order to train the squirrels not to become lazy, the old Jesuit would skip a random day so they would learn how to be aware and seek the abundance of food (in different forms) elsewhere.

Reflection

If we take time to slow down and be aware of the graces, blessings, life lessons, and gifts that are active in our lives, our memory will register those instances. More than that, that sense of true peace will register in our HEART of hearts. Many times, His gifts and blessings come in different forms (often not in the form that we wanted or are accustomed to), it is up to us to learn and seek them out, because even though they are different forms, they all come from one true love of the Giver. If we remember this reality, we will become “aware of the presence of the Giver” and learn how to savor and appreciate His gifts, especially register the precious presence of Him and create a spiritual meeting ground and loving relationship between the Giver and the receiver. This is the beginning of prayer: gratitude in knowing that God loves and meets me where I am today...

“Father, please let me savor your moments of loving grace in my life.”

Scriptural suggestions: Luke 1:26-38 and/or 1 Samuel 3:1-11.

Prayer Notes:

LESSON 4 FROM PRAYING WITH THE SQUIRRELS

Lesson

When I have my chance to know the squirrels, I start to address more personally. They are no longer some squirrels, but there is that natural caring feeling to keep thinking about them, “How are my squirrels doing today?” I often think about them when I am not with them, and always try to find different options to nourish and show my loving care for them (even when they do not recognize all that went on behind my simple actions).

Reflection

The same thing can be said about God and our relationship with Him. When we get to know Him intimately, we cannot simply go on to address Him as “some god that is out there” but “My God – Abba – My Father – My only love.” It is natural for us to take possession of the one whom we love personally in all possible ways; thus, our love for God begins like that but will become much more sacrificial and self-giving as it matures.

God already knows, loves, and calls us by name; it is up to us to listen to that unique identity, mission, and vocation so we can live fully as His sons and daughters, and ultimately be happy to bring and share that love with other brothers and sisters who are lost or still seeking Him.

When we know who and where He is, we are able to identify and find Him instead of seeking false and temporary happiness elsewhere. In an amazing way, when we are truly with Him, we become spiritually united with our brothers and sisters of goodwill to call out “Abba – Our Father” and rest in His love.

* To mark the halfway point of our 7-day meditation, I would like to include a small part of Mother Teresa of Calcutta's writings as another valuable reference for your spiritual journey. They show her burning desire to satiate the thirst of Jesus. She is particularly clear in her encouragement for us to become children of God the Father, imitate Jesus, and let ourselves be immersed in the workings of the Holy Spirit.

"Father, I love to be with you."

Scriptural suggestions: 1 John 4:7-19 and/or Psalm 23

Prayer Notes:

[Please try to understand Mother's writing style, especially when English is not her first language.]

You have said “Yes” to Jesus – and He has taken you at your word. The Word of God became Man – Poor. Your word to God – became Jesus – poor so this terrible emptiness you experience. God cannot fill what is full. He can fill only emptiness – deep poverty – and your “Yes” is the beginning of being or becoming empty. It is not how much we really have to give – but how empty we are – so that we can receive fully in life and let Him live His life in us.

In you today – He wants to relive His complete submission to His Father – allow Him to do so. Does not matter what you feel – as long as He feels alright in you. Take away your eyes from your self and rejoice that you have nothing – that you are nothing – that you can do nothing. Give Jesus a big smile – each time your nothingness frightens you.

This is the poverty of Jesus. You and I must let Him live in us & through us in the world.

Cling to Our Lady – for she too – before she could become full of grace – full of Jesus – had to go through that darkness “How could this be done?” But the moment she said “Yes,” she had need to go in haste to give Jesus to John & his family.

Keep giving Jesus to your people not by words but by your example – by your being in love with Jesus – by radiating His holiness and spreading His fragrance of love everywhere you go.

Just keep the joy of Jesus as your strength. Be happy and at peace. Accept whatever He gives – and give whatever He takes with a big smile.

You belong to Him – tell Him I am Yours & if you cut me to pieces every single piece will be only all Yours.

Tell Jesus, “I will be the one.” I will comfort, encourage and love Him... Be with Jesus. [During His trial] He prayed and prayed, and then he went to look for consolation, but there was none... I always write that sentence, “I looked for one to comfort me, but I have no one.” Then I write, “Be the one.” So now you must be that one. Try to be the one to share with Him, to comfort Him, to console Him. So let us ask our Lady to help us understand... do whatever you believe God is asking you to do to be the one to satiate Him.

You know – as much as I do – Christ cannot deceive. Therefore whatever we do to the least – we do it to Him. Let the joy of the Lord be your strength. For He alone is the way worth following, the light worth lighting, the life worth living, and the love worth loving....

LESSON 5 FROM PRAYING WITH THE SQUIRRELS

Lesson

Those squirrels who live near an acorn tree outside of the Dining Hall have an abundant resource of their favorite nuts (on top of their daily portions from the old Jesuit), which they waste, throwing away a lot of the outer substance. They even get to the point of being picky: not wasting their time with the smaller or un-fresh acorns. On the other hand, the squirrels in the Jesuit Garden do not have or see an abundance of acorns, so when I give them one, they savor and eat every single edible part of it. However, they too become picky when being used of me bring them a fresh batch of acorns every day. I still try to feed them in a simple and loving way because of my love for God's creations.

Reflection

The same thing happens to us a lot of time, we under-appreciate and take things for granted, especially for the invaluable gift of redemption, the abundance of talent, grace, love, and mercy are given to us by our loving Father, in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. We become picky, complaining, and/or bickering about the gifts while others around the world, those who are lost or trying hard to seek, have not felt or seen it yet (they are missing the supernatural and complete picture one way or another). However, out of His love for us, God our Father continues to give because "you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." (Luke 15:31)

Our challenge is to see, appreciate, and recognize this loving reality and share it with others so they can also experience and see the Trinity's love instead of becoming inappreciative, jealous, and saddened by the lack of His love for us. Do not let the love already outpoured go to waste as we become more ignorant and self-entitled.

“Father, I thank you for your patience and love in revealing my distrustful and selfish nature. Please help me to trust in you completely, for you love me unconditionally and have many things [more] to show me in the way of love.”

Scriptural suggestions: Luke 15:11-32 and/or Luke 7:36-50.

Prayer Notes:

LESSON 6 FROM PRAYING WITH THE SQUIRRELS

Lesson

When a squirrel eats an acorn or any other type of food, it instinctively knows which one is good and which one is rotten or spoiled. It knows how to remove what is not necessary and eat what is edible. However, sometimes the action becomes too familiar that it becomes sloppy or unaware, thus resulting in a wasteful manner of many good, edible acorns. Squirrels get very sloppy and greedy when I try to feed them some good food, trying to stuff and gulp as much food in their mouth, especially when they see another squirrel or something that is endangering their morsel of food. Nonetheless, nothing is wasted. The morsels forgotten and ignored by squirrels are picked up by sparrows and other birds waiting to eat the leftovers, and the cracked acorns are gaining a providential boost with germination.

Reflection

We often receive gifts in their complete package with parts that seem not usable for us (now) and parts that do. We are called to accept them – with love and appreciation – as a whole and learn how to discern: take what is needed and usable and ignore or put aside what is not. However, when they are “complete” gifts from God, the part(s) we not see as important are sometimes there to teach us something deeper and be useful in the future or in another instance. Do not judge the gifts based on their monetary or materialistic value alone, but from the heart of the giver, especially when that Giver is God, who knows what we need (and not what we want). Thus, “gifts” from God could be our significant other, our family, our friends or enemies, a person, a consolation or desolation, a life lesson, life itself, etc., so do not simply “pick and choose” but “discover.” Every detail is uniquely designed and chosen for us, meaningful and full of love,

not just materialistic alone. We cannot throw it away without losing the bond of love, especially what is important and essential for our life.

If we do not appreciate the gifts, we will lose their providential, uniquely-made, meaningful, and life-changing value, and others might learn and “pick” them up – especially those who are more “simple,” aware, profound, or appreciative. Do not be jealous then! Loving grace will become beneficial one way or another (just like rain and sunshine), but sad for us if we do not recognize and receive what is in store. Therefore, learn to receive and love what is given, especially ourselves – our whole humanity and life – as a gift from God to be discovered and discerned (removing what is not of God and keeping what is of Him) and become a loving gift for others.

“Father, you are present in everything, and everything in my life is your present out of love. Let them remind me of you and help me to see you in them – instead of themselves alone.”

Scriptural suggestion: Luke 12:15-21 and/or Psalm 32.

Prayer Notes:

LESSON 7 FROM PRAYING WITH THE SQUIRRELS

Lesson

Even though the squirrels are unaware of their contribution to life, by chewing open the acorns (especially ones that do not fit their appetites) and shaking them off the tree, they become a life-giving boost for the tree as it passes on its seeds of life for future generations. The same thing with the bees in the Jesuit Garden: by living and performing their daily tasks of collecting nectar faithfully, they bring life to nature through pollination, even though they themselves are not aware of it.

Reflection

More than the university squirrels and bees, if we know who we are in God (our unique, God-given identity, mission, and vocation), our witness and joy will radiate and change the world wherever we go. Even though they might be small and unnoticeable for many, they are big in the eyes of God because He loves me and I love Him.

When we chew open and savor the sweetness His self, life-giving food in the Eucharist or suck the divine nectar (grace of God present in different people and instances) to nourish our lives, God also gives us His pollen (love, truth, and holiness) so we can pollinate that reality to others in small but life-transforming action and duty.

“Father, please send your Spirit to enlightens and guides my heart to feel wholeheartedly your love in meeting and accepting me for who I am; to be with Jesus wherever He is, thus seeking Him in my brothers and sisters, and even in the dark corners of life; and let your transforming mercy free me from the world, the Devil, and my own illusions so I can be in service of your love for humanity.”

Scriptural suggestion: Psalm 51 and/or John 8:3-11.

Prayer Notes:

CONCLUSION

It is so easy to lock ourselves within our own self-centered standards. It is so easy to use terms and definitions to distinguish ourselves from the people who seem to be different than us. It is so easy to block and push people away because they are different than us. Nonetheless, at the end of the day, we have gone nowhere except locked up within our own self-created walls, barriers, and isolation zones. In doing so, we tend to become more frustrated, resentful, and angry because no one seems to fit our pitiful criteria.

Over and over again, the Lord and His apostles warned us of being rotted away by greed, jealousy, and sinfulness. He even used the term "Gehenna" so His audience can relate and understand what it means to be eaten alive by worms, maggots, and destructive matters of this world. He used the place where people dump their trash, garbage, and unwanted stuff. Imagine the pungent and off-putting smells! Everyone in the audience knew that place, and they could relate to the experience... and this is what the good Teacher wants to teach us, His disciples, too.

If we remain locked in and only want things our way, we have done nothing except expect people to meet our demands and expectations. If we only concern ourselves with building up treasures and comforts of this world, we have done nothing more than stay in our own kingdom and stand on our own pedestal to judge others according to our egocentric standards and criteria. If we do not die to ourselves, we can never live in Christ Jesus. If we do not have life in Him, we might look presentable and in control on the outside, but our souls will rot from within because the things of this world will steal and rob us of the true joy, hope, and love that can only be received in Him and through His loving grace. We can see this in people who seem to have it all -- successful, powerful, prestigious, desirable, and

objects of envy -- but are not really joyful deep from within. The things of this world slowly kill us because they destroy the Christ-life within us, making us faithless, hopeless, and loveless because we do not know how to truly love beyond ourselves, trust even when it is hard, and persevere when things seem to fall apart.

The focus on differences seems so natural because this way of thinking has been so ingrained within our human nature that we see sad results within the world and salvation histories, too. The hatred, condemnation, and cruelty that were caused by division were inflicted upon the Lord, and it even happened amongst His very own disciples and early Christians as well. Even though they followed Jesus, jealousy, divisions, discrimination, doubts, and comparisons existed among His own disciples. As a matter of fact, many of the apostolic epistles were written to reaffirm the genuine faith as well as to exhort the faithful to avoid unnecessary divisions that were caused by humanistic factors and desires.

Differences in education, cultures, classes, and ways of life caused a lot of prejudices, divisions, and isolations in the early Church. Sadly, it continues to this day! We often do it with the best of intentions, too. We like to create our own little clubhouses of like-minded people. We only welcome those deemed similar to us, but push away those not like us. Many times, in reaction to the wrong actions given by others, the people who get discriminated against create their own barrio and ghetto and choose to remain behind them, too. At the end of the day, we have done nothing except create and remain in our own little cliques, clubhouses, ghettos, and barrios of like-minded people. If that is the case, we must ask ourselves the real question... What have we done to build and further the Kingdom of God within our midst?!?

If we remain as we are, whether in our own comfort zones or as reactionary to what has been done to us, are we really living what Christ Jesus has called us to do? Are we humanly reacting or responding with grace? Are we willing to rise above or remain at the same or similar level of reactions? It is hard, but in order to overcome differences and their natural reactionary outcomes of discrimination and division, I would like to recommend another "D" word. And that is, discernment!

While it seems so natural to return an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, we are called to seek the presence of the Lord and His grace at work. We are called to rise above the immediate and typical reactions to discern what He wants us to do so as to respond with loving grace. The discernment of spirits is so important and crucial because the voices of the evil spirits want to push us to react and return what is humanly easy or comfortable for us. Our differences seem to be destructive, divisive, and off-putting at times, but when we try to slow things down, take a step back, reflect, pray, and discern the will of God. His loving presence might not be easily seen and recognized in the midst of many challenges, but we can always find the time to step back to see the learning opportunities even in the midst of many creative tensions and differences.

It is easy to say that we love God until other people, personalities, viewpoints, and differences come into the picture. Nonetheless, this is where true holiness and sanctification can be sought and enlivened! When we are dealing with the differences that exist in life, society, and personalities, we can learn to become more patient and trusting and let go of what is comfortable for us in order to truly live out the virtues of faith, hope, and love! Charity is hard to put into practice when things are challenging, but it gets complemented by faith and hope, reminding us to seek things that are above and that He is present with us even when we are

myopically zoned in with negativities, cynicism, and perhaps hopelessness, too.

At first glance, differences stand out and are off-putting at times. Nonetheless, if we step back and take the time to learn and grow from those differences, we will see that our differences complement each other because we are all uniquely different. Just like looking at a field of flowers, the differences in the shapes, sizes, colors, and types make it more beautiful and outstandingly complementary. Therefore, we can learn to overcome our differences if we all learn to step back to look, learn, grow, and integrate one another's uniqueness. If we just step back, be open, and willingly seek His presence, we will be able to individually and communally discern His will for us. Even when it gets challenging, we can still learn to grow to love one another by allowing ourselves to be sanctified, stretched, and conformed by His loving providence.

Indeed, it is not easy to live with differences. It is not easy to allow ourselves to spiritually grow and mature in dealing with different people and their challenges. These differences can become divisive at times, but they can become opportunities to seek God's loving will and teaching moments if we are willing to discern all things to embrace the standards of Christ. It is not easy at all, but it is necessary and worthwhile! If we are not willing to rise above our likes and personal comforts, society will fail and cease to exist because it can only be possible when each and every one is willing to carry the weight, work with one another, and is willing to make sacrifices for the greater and ultimate good.

In a world where many people want to be like God, powerful, in control, and have everything they want, the Lord Jesus Christ became one of us by emptying Himself, living like us in all things but sin. In a world where people want things to be catered to them, He taught us humility by washing His disciples' feet. In a world where small-minded people are

willing to hurt others to rise to power and get what they want, the Savior stooped down to our level to raise us up -- not according to human standards -- to divine standards. He showed us that humility, compassion, and meekness are essential qualities for God, so those who want to spend eternal life with the Almighty have to possess these important qualities, knowing that they are not worthy in themselves, but they love because of His love.

The Lord Jesus' humility is far from being weak and cowardly. On the contrary, only courageous and truthful people are willing to serve genuinely without losing control or power. His meekness is far from being enslaved by others, but being able to serve and love freely and completely without petty human calculations, manipulations, or benefits. Without a doubt, our Lord and Savior was not known for being the most powerful, richest, controlling, or prestigious in any sense of the word or by any human or social standards. He was known for His genuine and radical love! His self-giving love and truth freed us from slavery to lesser things and the sins that defined us. Therefore, to be called disciples of Christ is to be like the Master, emulating and learning from Him how to be truly life-giving with genuine humility and meekness.

Without human pettiness and self-centered worries about control, prestige, wealth, or power, we are able to truly be free and be who we are called to be. When we are truly free, we are able to live out our vocation as children of our Heavenly Father, disciples of Christ, and instruments of the Holy Spirit. If we know who we are, being humble, genuine, simple, and transparent to the One who knows and loves us, we are able to seek true wisdom and bear good fruits for the Kingdom instead of building things for ourselves alone.

If we are truly seeking wisdom from on high, we need to avoid being jealous of others and seeking selfish ambition, else we will destroy unity by sowing divisions that are based on disordered desires. When we worry

about our little selves, our hearts will grow embittered, and foul thoughts, desires, and practices will creep in because we lose sight of what we are called to do with consistency, perseverance, and humility. We become insincere and treat other people as objects and means to our self-glorifying ends when we let our passions, wants, desires, expectations, and demands be the egocentric values of our personal happiness instead of seeking the common and greater good!

As Catholics, we are reminded that we are not simply individual believers, only worrying about our own selves and salvation, for we also have a communal identity. We do not spend eternal life by ourselves; therefore, we do not only worry about our own salvation and ignore everyone else because we believe in the communion of saints. We are called to be the Church, for Christ gave His life for each and every one of us, gathering and uniting us together as His Mystical Body. We share this life of faith together as individuals and as the community of believers, knowing who we are personally and communally, helping each other to walk toward Him with mercy and unity of faith.

I truly believe that Christ Jesus does not call the equipped. He simply equips the ones He called. Nonetheless, this takes time because real growth is measured over the course of our journey and continually enriches us with His grace. With humility, we begin to recognize that we never stop growing and learning what it means to follow the Teacher and Master! Discipleship is that very personal and communal journey of continual growth. Where we are today is totally different than where we were in the past as we learn and adapt to life's challenges. We become in tune, flexible, and creative in letting what He taught us in prayer be enlivened and shared through our words and actions, life and deeds.

Therefore, let us ask God not to receive what we want or desire but to grow in greater love for Him and for our neighbor through genuine acts of loving service, faithful love, and hope-filled gifts of self. When we seek

to give to one another what is genuine and pure from the heart, peace will flow because we are able to be gentle and kind to one another. When we are willing to comply and conform ourselves to the will of God, seeking holiness with a life of humility, we will be able to practice mercy and bear good fruit. We have to be cultivators of peace by leading people to the Lord through a life of genuine faith, hope, and love. Perhaps it will take a long time, and some of us will never see the fruits of our labor, but we are called to sow good seeds of faith, cultivate them with love, and allow people to find peace in the Lord.

I hope and pray that we will bring people to His peace, cultivate, and work with one another as collaborators and co-workers in the Lord's vineyards. In a world of too many divisions, vocal outcries, defensive blame, and empty attacks of many what-ifs, could, should, or would have happened, let us seek, love, and live in His loving will, being simple, pure, peaceable, gentle, merciful, sincere, and persevering in being His disciples. Let us not be worried about being in the fight of whoever wants to be first or the greatest! The Lord knows our hearts, and that is good enough. Hence, let us BE who we are called to be in loving, serving, and praying well so that everything we belong to Him, and the good Lord who sees us will bring all things to completion and allow them to bear good fruits in due time.

ABOUT FATHER KHOI

I was born in the Southeast Asian country of Viet Nam.

When I was young, we had very little as a result of the Viet Nam War, especially under the strict and oppressive post-war Communist rule. By the (unimaginable) grace of God, our family was given the opportunity to immigrate to the United States. We settled in Kansas, where most of my father's side of the family resided at the time. After graduating from high school, I went to Texas to begin my priestly formation.

I joined a religious order and stayed with them for five years until, under the guidance and encouragement of my Novice Master, I discerned to transition from religious life to diocesan seminary formation. I was ordained to the priesthood on June 29.

After years of diocesan ministry as a parish priest, I am now serving our military personnel and their families in the United States Air and Space Forces as an active-duty Chaplain. It is my hope to repay America for giving me and my family a newfound freedom that was not afforded under the Communist regime in Viet Nam.

For more information, please visit frkhai.info or ithirst.us. My reflection blog and homily podcast channel are both named "I Thirst" (John 19:28), after Saint Mother Teresa of Kolkata's motto for her life and the Missionaries of Charity sisters. I love her simple and heartfelt charism, which is founded on love of Christ in the Eucharist and service of the poorest of the poor. You can also find me on popular social media platforms (@padrekhai).

PRINCIPLE AND FOUNDATION: Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. And the other things on the face of the earth are created for man and that they may help him in prosecuting the end for which he is created. From this it follows that man is to use them as much as they help him on to his end, and ought to rid himself of them so far as they hinder him as to it. For this it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things in all that is allowed to the choice of our free will and is not prohibited to it; so that, on our part, we want not health rather than sickness, riches rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, long rather than short life, and so in all the rest; desiring and choosing only what is most conducive for us to the end for which we are created.

**** This first set of rules are for understanding to some extent the different movements produced in the souls and for recognizing those that are good to admit them, and those that are bad, to reject them. ****

The First: In the persons who go from mortal sin to mortal sin, the enemy is commonly used to propose to them apparent pleasures, making them imagine sensual delights and pleasures in order to hold them more and make them grow in their vices and sins. In these persons the good spirit uses the opposite method, pricking them and biting their consciences through the process of reason.

The Second: In the persons who are going on intensely cleansing their sins and rising from good to better in the service of God our Lord, it is

the method contrary to that in the first Rule, for then it is the way of the evil spirit to bite, sadden and put obstacles, disquieting with false reasons, that one may not go on; and it is proper to the good to give courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations and quiet, easing, and putting away all obstacles, that one may go on in well doing.

The Third: OF SPIRITUAL CONSOLATION. I call it consolation when some interior movement in the soul is caused, through which the soul comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord; and when it can in consequence love no created thing on the face of the earth in itself, but in the Creator of them all. Likewise, when it sheds tears that move to love of its Lord, whether out of sorrow for one's sins, or for the Passion of Christ our Lord, or because of other things directly connected with His service and praise. Finally, I call consolation every increase of hope, faith and charity, and all interior joy which calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one's soul, quieting it and giving it peace in its Creator and Lord.

The Fourth: OF SPIRITUAL DESOLATION. I call desolation all the contrary of the third rule, such as darkness of soul, disturbance in it, movement to things low and earthly, the unquiet of different agitations and temptations, moving to want of confidence, without hope, without love, when one finds oneself all lazy, tepid, sad, and as if separated from his Creator and Lord. Because, as consolation is contrary to desolation, in the same way the thoughts which come from consolation are contrary to the thoughts which come from desolation.

The Fifth: In time of desolation never to make a change; but to be firm and constant in the resolutions and determination in which one was the day preceding such desolation, or in the determination in which he was in the preceding consolation. Because, as in consolation it is rather the

good spirit who guides and counsels us, so in desolation it is the bad, with whose counsels we cannot take a course to decide rightly.

The Sixth: Although in desolation we ought not to change our first resolutions, it is very helpful intensely to change ourselves against the same desolation, as by insisting more on prayer, meditation, on much examination, and by giving ourselves more scope in some suitable way of doing penance.

The Seventh: Let him who is in desolation consider how the Lord has left him in trial in his natural powers, in order to resist the different agitations and temptations of the enemy; since he can with the Divine help, which always remains to him, though he does not clearly perceive it: because the Lord has taken from him his great fervor, great love and intense grace, leaving him, however, grace enough for eternal salvation.

The Eighth: Let him who is in desolation labor to be in patience, which is contrary to the vexations which come to him: and let him think that he will soon be consoled, employing against the desolation the devices, as is said in the sixth Rule.

The Ninth: There are three principal reasons why we find ourselves desolate. The first is, because of our being tepid, lazy or negligent in our spiritual exercises; and so through our faults, spiritual consolation withdraws from us. The second, to try us and see how much we are and how much we let ourselves out in His service and praise without such great pay of consolation and great graces. The third, to give us true acquaintance and knowledge, that we may interiorly feel that it is not ours to get or keep great devotion, intense love, tears, or any other spiritual consolation, but that all is the gift and grace of God our Lord, and that we may not build a nest in a thing not ours, raising our intellect into some pride

or vain glory, attributing to us devotion or the other things of the spiritual consolation.

The Tenth: Let him who is in consolation think how he will be in the desolation which will come after, taking new strength for then.

The Eleventh: Let him who is consoled see to humbling himself and lowering himself as much as he can, thinking how little he is able for in the time of desolation without such grace or consolation. On the contrary, let him who is in desolation think that he can do much with the grace sufficient to resist all his enemies, taking strength in his Creator and Lord.

The Twelfth: The enemy acts like a woman, in being weak against vigor and strong of will. Because, as it is the way of the woman when she is quarrelling with some man to lose heart, taking flight when the man shows her much courage: and on the contrary, if the man, losing heart, begins to fly, the wrath, revenge, and ferocity of the woman is very great, and so without bounds; in the same manner, it is the way of the enemy to weaken and lose heart, his temptations taking flight, when the person who is exercising himself in spiritual things opposes a bold front against the temptations of the enemy, doing diametrically the opposite. And on the contrary, if the person who is exercising himself commences to have fear and lose heart in suffering the temptations, there is no beast so wild on the face of the earth as the enemy of human nature in following out his damnable intention with so great malice.

The Thirteenth: Likewise, he acts as a licentious lover in wanting to be secret and not revealed. For, as the licentious man who, speaking for an evil purpose, solicits a daughter of a good father or a wife of a good husband, wants his words and persuasions to be secret, and the contrary displeases him much, when the daughter reveals to her father or the wife to her husband his licentious words and depraved intention, because he

easily gathers that he will not be able to succeed with the undertaking begun: in the same way, when the enemy of human nature brings his wiles and persuasions to the just soul, he wants and desires that they be received and kept in secret; but when one reveals them to his good Confessor or to another spiritual person that knows his deceits and evil ends, it is very grievous to him, because he gathers, from his manifest deceits being discovered, that he will not be able to succeed with his wickedness begun.

The Fourteenth: Likewise, he behaves as a chief bent on conquering and robbing what he desires: for, as a captain and chief of the army, pitching his camp, and looking at the forces or defenses of a stronghold, attacks it on the weakest side, in like manner the enemy of human nature, roaming about, looks in turn at all our virtues, theological, cardinal and moral; and where he finds us weakest and most in need for our eternal salvation, there he attacks us and aims at taking us.

**** This second set of rules serves for a more accurate discernment of spirit in conjunction with the first set. ****

The First: It is proper to God and to His Angels in their movements to give true spiritual gladness and joy, taking away all sadness and disturbance which the enemy brings on. Of this latter it is proper to fight against the spiritual gladness and consolation, bringing apparent reasons, subtleties and continual fallacies.

The Second: It belongs to God our Lord to give consolation to the soul without preceding cause, for it is the property of the Creator to enter, go out and cause movements in the soul, bringing it all into love of His

Divine Majesty. I say without cause: without any previous sense or knowledge of any object through which such consolation would come, through one's acts of understanding and will.

The Third: With cause, as well the good Angel as the bad can console the soul, for contrary ends: the good Angel for the profit of the soul, that it may grow and rise from good to better, and the evil Angel, for the contrary, and later on to draw it to his damnable intention and wickedness.

The Fourth: It is proper to the evil Angel, who forms himself under the appearance of an angel of light, to enter with the devout soul and go out with himself: that is to say, to bring good and holy thoughts, conformable to such just soul, and then little by little he aims at coming out drawing the soul to his covert deceits and perverse intentions.

The Fifth: We ought to note well the course of the thoughts, and if the beginning, middle and end is all good, inclined to all good, it is a sign of the good Angel; but if in the course of the thoughts which he brings it ends in something bad, of a distracting tendency, or less good than what the soul had previously proposed to do, or if it weakens it or disquiets or disturbs the soul, taking away its peace, tranquility and quiet, which it had before, it is a clear sign that it proceeds from the evil spirit, enemy of our profit and eternal salvation.

The Sixth: When the enemy of human nature has been perceived and known by his serpent's tail and the bad end to which he leads on, it helps the person who was tempted by him, to look immediately at the course of the good thoughts which he brought him at their beginning, and how little by little he aimed at making him descend from the spiritual sweetness and joy in which he was, so far as to bring him to his depraved

intention; in order that with this experience, known and noted, the person may be able to guard for the future against his usual deceits.

The Seventh: In those who go on from good to better, the good Angel touches such soul sweetly, lightly and gently, like a drop of water which enters into a sponge; and the evil touches it sharply and with noise and disquiet, as when the drop of water falls on the stone. And the above-said spirits touch in a contrary way those who go on from bad to worse. The reason of this is that the disposition of the soul is contrary or like to the said Angels. Because, when it is contrary, they enter perceptibly with clatter and noise; and when it is like, they enter with silence as into their own home, through the open door.

The Eighth: When the consolation is without cause, although there be no deceit in it, as being of God our Lord alone, as was said; still the spiritual person to whom God gives such consolation, ought, with much vigilance and attention, to look at and distinguish the time itself of such actual consolation from the following, in which the soul remains warm and favored with the favor and remnants of the consolation past; for often in this second time, through one's own course of habits and the consequences of the concepts and judgments, or through the good spirit or through the bad, he forms various resolutions and opinions which are not given immediately by God our Lord, and therefore they have need to be very well examined before entire credit is given them, or they are put into effect.