

My Heart's Desire

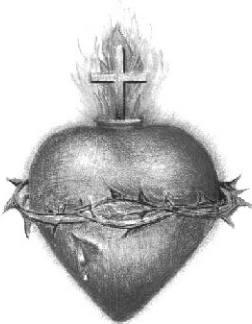
SPIRITUAL FORMATION



“My Heart’s Desire” is spiritual formation that draws our hearts into a more committed relationship with God through prayer, Scripture and Church teaching.

My Heart's Desire

<u>Table of Contents:</u>	<u>Page</u>
Meet the Presenters	2
Notes for Small Group Facilitators	3
Introduction to “My Heart’s Desire”	4
Journey of Desire Worksheet	6
Your Heart’s Desire	8
The Prayer Relationship	12
Who am I?	15
<i>Suggested Reading for Further Study</i>	19
Who is God?	20
For This is the Will of My Father	25
Missing the Mark	30
Reconciliation	37
<i>Further (and classical) Reading</i>	42
The Call to Intercession	43
Discernment	48
Living in the Holy Spirit	53
Pray as You Can	57



Meet the Presenters

Mrs. Nancy Brown has been a member of Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Fort Smith, AR for more than 30 years. She has served at I.C. as a teacher’s aide, a School Board member, lector, Eucharistic minister, and she currently serves in hospital ministry at St. Edward Mercy Medical Center, bringing Communion to the sick. In addition to being a spiritual director, Nancy has served in leadership roles for Scripture Studies and Spiritual Formation programs for over 20 years. She and her husband, Bob, have been married for 34 years and have three grown children. Nancy can be contacted at: nancy.brown@prophetline.net

Fr. Tom Elliott is a priest in the Diocese of Little Rock and the pastor of Christ the King Catholic Church in Fort Smith, AR. Graduating from Saint Meinrad College Seminary in 1995 with a Bachelor Degree in Psychology, Fr. Tom went on to receive a Master of Divinity from Notre Dame Seminary. He was ordained a priest in June of 1999. In addition to his parish ministry and interest in spiritual formation, he writes and performs Christian music and offers talks and retreats. He can be contacted at: FatherT@FatherT.com

Dc. Chuck Hankins is a Permanent Deacon in the Diocese of Little Rock and is assigned to St. Boniface Catholic Church in Fort Smith, AR. After being ordained in 2002, Dc. Chuck retired from a career in retail and began serving as the Director of Pastoral Services for St. Edward Mercy Medical Center. He teaches religious education classes, leads various spiritual formation programs, and gives talks and seminars on workplace spirituality. He and his wife, Julie, have four grown children and eight grandchildren. Dc. Chuck can be contacted at: chuckhankins@cox.net

Mrs. Julie Hankins spent 15 years in administration in the corporate world before beginning her ministry in Family Life. Over the past few years, Julie has led a variety of Spiritual Formation programs and facilitated faith sharing groups. She spent five years in the Diocese of Little Rock Diaconate program with her husband, Deacon Chuck Hankins, to whom she has been married for 28 years. They have four grown children and eight grandchildren. Julie can be contacted at: julie99@cox.net

Mr. Tom Jakobs has been married for 25 years and lives in Alma, AR with his wife and son. He has a BA in Theology and is an avid reader and pray-er. For the past decade he has offered numerous adult faith formation opportunities at the parish level. He is also an engineer specializing in the research and development of assistive devices for people with disabilities. Tom can be contacted at: tjakobs@invotek.org

Mrs. Cindy Shaw and her husband, Cody, live in Springdale, AR and are members of St. Raphael Parish, where she is currently employed as the Director of Religious Education for Children and Adults. She is finishing her third and final year in the Little Rock Theology Institute. Cindy is a spiritual director and also directs retreats and seminars on prayer and adult formation. She has served as a leader and facilitator for both Scripture study and adult formation for over twenty years. Cindy and Cody have been married 37 years and have four children and six granddaughters. Cindy can be contacted at: cshaw@straphaelcc.org

Notes for Small Group Facilitators:

First of all, thank you very much for being willing to host and facilitate a spiritual formation group. We all live very busy lives and this is one more thing added to your week. We pray that God blesses you for your willingness to participate in the spiritual growth of your brothers and sisters in Christ.

On this page, you will find some helpful hints that we hope will assist you in hosting a group. This program has been specifically designed so that the small group facilitator does not have to give teachings and does not have to answer people's questions. Your main ministry will be to make people feel welcome and to make sure that the group's discussions stay on track with the topic. Here are some of the different aspects of the small group meetings:

I. The Opening Prayer

- A. An opening prayer is provided for every week that has a lesson involved. You can either make up your own opening prayers, or use the ones provided in this book. You will notice that there are not opening prayers provided for the "Prayer Processing" weeks. On these weeks you can either make up your own prayer or use the one from the previous lesson.
 - B. Please start every meeting with a prayer.
- ### II. After the opening prayer, you will do one of two things— either start the CD with the week's lesson on it and let everyone listen and follow along in their workbooks, or (if it is a "Prayer Processing" week) you will ask who would like to share about their prayer experience during the previous week, with the focus being on how the members of the group experienced the previous week's lesson in their lives, as well as how they experienced the prayer suggestions and graces that were offered in the workbook.
- A. On the weeks where there is a lesson to listen to, the first 15-20 minutes will be spent listening to the lesson and then the group will have an opportunity to share with one another what struck them as important or interesting from the talk, or how they have experienced what was talked about in the lesson in their own lives.
 - B. On the weeks where there is not a lesson to listen to, the group will have the entire hour to share what has been going on in prayer.
 - C. The first three weeks have lessons to listen to every week. For the remaining lessons, there is a "Prayer Processing" week in between the lessons.

III. Small Group Dynamics

- A. Facilitating small groups can sometimes be challenging. As the facilitator, your main ministry is to make sure that everyone who would like to share has an opportunity to share. **Please communicate to your group the following three things at the start of your second meeting:**
 1. Let everyone know that you have been given the task, as the facilitator, of trying not to let any *one person* dominate all of the discussions.
 2. Also let them know that no one is expect to comment on or try to "fix" other people after they have shared.
 3. Everyone is expected to keep what is shared in the group confidential.
- B. Please start and end on time. If your group is going to meet longer than one hour, make sure everyone knows, understands, and accepts that time frame before the group begins.

IV. Playing the CDs

- A. Having downloaded the music AAC files from the website, you can play them and/or burn them onto CDs using iTunes. If you do not have ITunes, you can download it for free at: www.itunes.com

Once again, thank you for your willingness to host and facilitate this program.
May God bless all of us with an even greater desire for His love!

WEEK 1:

Introduction

Fr. Tom Elliott

Synopsis: Many people are seeking a deeper relationship with God. This spiritual formation program, designed to draw our hearts into a more committed relationship with God through prayer, Scripture and Church teaching, is one tool for deepening this relationship. The format of this spiritual formation program includes small faith-sharing groups, talks, and workbooks that include notes and prayer suggestions.

Optional Small Group Opening Prayer:

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. God of life and love, in the beginning of time You created humanity in Your own image and likeness. You put Your own divine desire and love in our hearts. We long for You. We ask for Your blessing upon these weeks of spiritual formation. Give us the grace we need to be more and more aware of our greatest desires for love and life. Help us to know You, know ourselves, and know one another in the light of Your awesome love for us. You cherish us, God. And this is all we truly desire. We ask all of this through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Outline of Talk:

- I. Many people are spiritually starving; desiring a deeper relationship with God.
 - A. Spiritual formation—that is, developing our love-relationship with God—must be the foundation for every aspect of our faith-life—knowing God, knowing one’s self, discernment, repentance, reconciliation, spiritual warfare, intercession, and evangelization.
 - B. The ancient idea that spirituality and contemplative prayer were only for priests, monks and nuns has been shattered in our modern world and people of every walk of life have become deeply aware of their desire to KNOW God.
 - C. In a world of busyness and craziness that often chisels away at our self-worth and identity, we all desire an anchor that reminds us that we are loved and cherished beyond imagining.
- II. More than two years ago, a group of us began talking about putting together our own spiritual formation program that would take the best aspects of all of the different programs, books, and conferences we had experienced and combine them into one.
 - A. We narrowed the scope of the formation program and put together this 20-week experience that touches briefly on a few of the most fundamental aspects of our relationship with God, drawing mainly from Scripture and the Church’s history and expertise in spirituality.
 - B. What is “My Heart’s Desire”? It is spiritual formation that draws our hearts into a more committed relationship with God through prayer, Scripture and Church teaching.
- III. This is not the beginning of your faith journey, nor is it the end. This spiritual formation is part of that blessed middle ground. It is very important, as we begin this formation that we reverence where God has led us in the past.
 - A. What have been the most important spiritual milestones in our lives?
 - B. Where and how have we experienced God’s love in the past?
- IV. The format of our spiritual formation contains several important elements—the small group, the teaching, the workbook, and the prayer.
 - A. Usually, your small group will meet together at someone’s house for an hour a week.
 1. The meeting will begin with the host leading the group in a prayer, and then you will spend the first 15 minutes listening to an assigned talk.
 2. After each talk, the group will have time to discuss what you thought was most important, or what word, phrase, or idea struck a chord in your heart during the talk.

3. Some weeks, the group will have the entire hour to share with one another what the Lord has been doing in prayer.

Were there any particular insights that came to us during prayer that touched our hearts? Were we aware of God's presence in a particular way?

- a. Some people will not feel comfortable sharing with the group, and no one will be forced to share. But, I encourage everyone to courageously step out of their comfort zone.
- b. Some people might struggle with silence (i.e. not constantly sharing). We have asked the group facilitators to try to keep the sharing balanced, and not to let any one person dominate the hour.
- c. Also, we have asked the group leaders to keep the sharing focused on what the Lord has been doing in our prayer lives.

B. Another element of the formation program is the workbook, which provides an outline for each talk, gives you a place to make notes, and offers prayer suggestions for each week.

1. We have tried to be very careful in our "prayer suggestions" so that we are not distracting from where God might be moving in your individual prayer life. Our hope is that the prayer suggestions serve as a motivation and encouragement to pray, but that ultimately, God is the leader of our prayer time.

- a. One of the most important aspects of the prayer suggestions is the "Journey of Desire" Worksheet found on pages six and seven.
- b. This Worksheet will provide a common thread throughout the whole program.
- c. We highly encourage everyone to take time to prayerfully reflect and meditate on the various aspects of this worksheet, especially since we will continue to come back to it and build upon it through the course of the program.

2. In addition to the prayer suggestions, there will be a "grace" or gift to pray for each week. As with the prayer suggestions, the "graces" are suggestions, and if that's not the particular gift that God is inviting you to ask for at that time, then, by all means, follow where the Lord is leading rather than following the book.

3. We will frequently use Scripture verses as part of our talks, as well as part of our prayer suggestions. If you are unfamiliar with the Catholic understanding of Scriptural interpretation and study, then I would recommend listening to the Bible talks by Mr. Tom Jakobs that can be found on my website—www.FatherT.com. They are labeled "Bible I" and "Bible II" on the "Spiritual Formation" page. We have worked hard to make sure that our use of Scripture follows traditional Catholic understanding as opposed to the fundamentalism and literalism that is sometimes found in Scripture study today.

V. Lastly, if it is not already evident, it will soon become evident that Satan wants nothing more than to distract us from this experience and growth.

A. Over the next twenty weeks, Satan will give you numerous opportunities and encouragements to quit this formation.

B. There will be distractions, discouragements, accusations, misunderstandings, jealousies, and angers that will surface within our individual hearts, as well as within the small groups.

C. Knowing and expecting these things will be our best defense against them. Let's also keep one another in our daily prayer, especially for the gifts of strength and perseverance.

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS for WEEK 1

The suggested GRACE to pray for during this week: **TO PERSEVERE IN OUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY**

† On pages six and seven, there is a worksheet that we will be using throughout the whole formation program in order to better understand what God has been doing, and is doing, in our lives. Throughout this week, we encourage you to spend some time every day in prayer asking God to remind you of where your life's journey has taken you so far. This is an extremely important starting place for the rest of the program.

1. Begin by dividing your age by the 13 spaces provided in the "Chronology" column, and fill in those boxes with the appropriate ages. For example, a 52-year-old would fill in each box with a four year period of time: birth-4, 5-8, 9-12, etc.

2. During prayer this week, make some notes in the boxes in columns B thru D (*we will use the other columns in the weeks ahead*). Since there is a limited amount of space in these columns, you might want to write more in your prayer journal as you reflect on your answers.

You will not be asked to share any of this information— it's between you and God.

A. Chronology of my life	B. What were the most important relationships in my life during this time?	C. What was I most thankful for during this period in my life?	D. What were my greatest emotional hurts and disappointments?	E. What were the most pervasive desires during this time in my life?
Age 1-5				
Age 6-10				
Age 11-15				
Age 16-20				
Age 21-25				
Age 26-30				
Age 31-35				
Age 36-40				
Age 41-45				
Age 46-50				
Age 51-55				
Age 56-60				
Age 61-				

WEEK 2:

Your Heart's Desire

Mrs. Cindy Shaw

Synopsis: Each of us has a desire that can only be satisfied by God. We often try to satisfy this desire with the things of the world; things we often accept as “normal.” Growing in holiness and happiness requires us to recognize that God is our ultimate desire. Through the intimacy of quiet prayer, Scripture, and prayer journaling, we begin to experience Him Whom our hearts’ desire.

Optional Small Group Opening Prayer:

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Father, You created the world and called each of us into being. You formed our hearts and know each of us better than we know ourselves. We pray that the ears of our heart will be open to hear and receive all that You have to share with us today and in the upcoming weeks. Give us the grace to allow Your Spirit to move within us and to draw us closer to You. We make this prayer in Jesus’ name. Amen.”

Outline of Talk:

NOTES

- I. “If you find your delight in the Lord, He will grant you your heart’s desire” (Psalm 37:4).
 - A. In the beginning, when God formed all of creation, He made Adam and Eve and placed them in the Garden of Eden, His Paradise. All of their heart’s desires were realized as they shared a close relationship with their Creator.
 - B. Then Adam and Eve allowed their hearts to harden to God’s will for them and willingly accepted the apple of temptation.
 1. Satan’s lie convinced them that what God had for them was not enough and that the world could offer them more than what He had provided for them.
 2. As they left the garden, the place where they had known and experienced the presence of God, they began a journey of desire. Their hearts desired to once again be made complete and be fulfilled in the presence of God.
- II. Because of mankind’s first sin we also lost Paradise.
 - A. Most of us have accepted that the loss of Paradise, the loss of an intimate relationship with God, is to be considered our “normal.”
 - B. Yet there is a restlessness deep inside our hearts that suggests to us that there just might be something more in life than what we are living.
 - C. Within each of our hearts lies a hidden truth, a secret desire buried deep within us that longs for something that seems to be missing.
 1. Some of us spend a lifetime searching for what we are looking for.
 2. Sometimes we’re not even aware that we are on this journey of searching. But our hearts realize that something is missing. And so begins our own journey as we travel forward seeking this wonderful gift of God, our true heart’s desire.

In their song, “Where I Belong,” the band Mercy Me reminds us that:

- Everybody tries
- To find the purpose for their life
- In hopes that one more day is justified
- But once you truly see
- The very reason why you breathe
- It becomes so much more than getting by.

III. We each desire to do more than “just get by;” we want to have a full and complete life.

- A. We work hard to fill a void that is always present within us. We tell ourselves that we can curb the disappointments in life if only we work harder at being happy.
 1. We strive to have the most successful career, the most beautiful and talented family, or the perfectly shaped body.
 2. We devour self-help books hoping that we can find the answer to life’s problems and challenges.
 3. We keep packing more things into our already bulging day, trying to do more so that we can be more of who we think we are supposed to be.
 4. At some point in this long, task-filled life, we begin to realize that all this busyness might be an attempt to distract us from pursuing that part of our heart that craves something more than the world can give.

IV. Desire is the fuel that drives us in life.

- A. Proverbs 29:18 reminds us: “My people perish without a vision.” Without a vision— without desire in life— we would have nothing.
- B. Unfortunately, many times we pretend and try to convince ourselves that the very next thing we are striving to attain is exactly what we were always looking for and that will “do” it for us.
- C. What is it that we really want in life?
 1. We want to be happy, to be wanted and needed and we each desire to be accepted and loved.
 2. However, the search for our heart’s desire is somewhat bewildering in that most of the time we don’t really know what our desire in life is.
 - a. Maybe we don’t really know where to find that unconditional love and acceptance that will bring us true happiness.
 - b. So if acquiring what the world has to offer doesn’t fill that empty hole, then what exactly ARE we searching for?
 - c. Why do we keep returning to the same place repeatedly when we already know that it has never satisfied our desire?

V. The God-shaped hole.

- A. Blaise Pascal, a French theologian who lived in the 1600’s wrote, “...there is in every man the infinite abyss that can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself” (Thoughts Sect VII, 425).

- B. Inside each one of us is a God-shaped hole that absolutely nothing else will fill. No matter how long and hard we try to stuff and push more “things” into that hole, nothing will ever satisfy that emptiness but God.
 - C. Psalm 42:1-2 speaks of satisfying our soul’s ache, “As the deer pants for running waters, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.”
 - D. Just as our physical bodies must have food and water to live and be healthy, so too does our soul crave the Word of God and the water of life, His Holy Spirit.
 - E. Psalm 46 answers, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46). God calls us to separate ourselves from the busyness of everyday life and to spend time with Him in prayer and quiet.
 - F. In Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, we are reminded to “pray constantly” (5:17). While this does not mean that we are to be constantly on our knees imploring God for our desires and needs, it does mean that we are called to develop an attitude of prayer that is carried within our hearts throughout our day.
 - G. The Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus went off by Himself to pray. “In those days he departed to the mountain to pray, and he spent the night in prayer to God” (Luke 6:12).
 - 1. This Gospel also tells us that Jesus prayed in a “certain place” (Luke 11:1). This doesn’t necessarily mean that Jesus went to the exact spot every time He prayed. After all, He did move from town to town preaching His message, but the Greek word in this passage means a place marked off from the surrounding area.
 - 2. Jesus separated Himself from the busyness of His surroundings, going apart from His family, friends and ministry so that He could become refreshed and recharged by the Holy Spirit.
 - 3. It’s easier to get into the habit of praying if we follow His example and have a special place or time set aside when we can pray. It’s here, in the quiet of our time alone with God that our hearts begin to find great delight in knowing Him personally and intimately and have its deepest desire realized in Him.
- VI. This week you will each have the chance to explore not only what scripture says about desire, but also be presented with opportunities to step back and examine what it is that you might be missing and yearning for in life.
- A. In your workbook you will find Scriptures that I invite you to not only look up in your Bible, but to read or “pray” aloud several times.
 - 1. Try to pay attention to any word or phrase that stands out or jumps out at you as you read.
 - 2. Then just sit with those words and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to your heart more about what God wants to share with you.
 - 3. You might want to write down in your journal or notebook the Scripture or any prominent words.
 - 4. Just try to be open to what it is that God desires for you at this particular time in your life.

- B. The psalmist proclaims a wonderful promise to us in Psalm 37, “If you find your delight in the Lord, he will grant you your heart’s desire.”
1. God made you and formed you in His image and likeness and He desires that you find your delight in Him and within the gifts that He offers to you.
 2. He placed His heart within your heart and implanted in each of you the truth and delight of your existence.
 3. Within your heart lies the fulfillment of His love in you. And so your heart now leads you on your journey of desire as you travel onward toward your Creator.

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS for WEEK 2

The suggested GRACE to be praying for this week: **TO BE MORE AWARE OF OUR DESIRE FOR GOD**

- † Using the worksheet on pages 6-7, spend some time reflecting on what you have desired most in life (physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually) at the various ages listed in column A. Write down your answers in the spaces provided in column “E.” Take the desires that seem the most significant to you and spend some time prayer-journaling about them.
- † PRAYER JOURNALING-PART I: Journaling is a great method of communicating with God. Journaling can be a very concrete way of hearing from God. A simple way to journal can be described as this—writing a letter to God. Here’s how it works:
1. Our journals should be something special. It should be kept in a safe place where NO ONE will stumble upon it and read it. It should contain nothing but our sincere HONESTY. If we think other people are going to read our journals, we will not be honest. Journaling is absolutely useless unless we’re honest.
 2. Every journal entry should begin with the date. There may be times when God asks us to go back to a certain journal entry in order to teach or show us something, so the date is important.
 3. Next, we should write a letter to God. Our letter should be focused on *feelings* more than *details*. Diaries are interested in describing the details of our lives, prayer journals are meant to capture how various people and situations made us feel. God communicates through our feelings.
 4. When journaling about Scripture, we should focus on the words/phrases that “jumped” out at us while we were reading. Then we write to God what we think about those words/phrases and ask Him any questions that might come up in our hearts.
 5. It is important to pay attention to common “themes” that come up in our journaling day after day or week after week.
 6. It is always best if our journaling time is preceded by a period of quiet prayer, where we allow ourselves to be attentive to God’s presence and Holy Spirit.
- † Here are some Scripture verses and quotes that might also be helpful for prayer this week:
- ♥ Psalm 37:4 What is your desire as you enter into this formation series?
 - ♥ St. Augustine wrote, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.”
Is there an area of your life that is restless?
 - ♥ Read Psalm 27, noticing any words or phrases that might stand out to you.
 - ♥ 1 Chronicles 29:16-19
 - ♥ St. Gregory the Great, in one of his homilies, spoke of Mary Magdalene’s great love for Jesus when she refused to leave Christ’s empty tomb. St. Gregory said, “At first she sought but did not find, but when she persevered it happened that she found what she was looking for. When our desires are not satisfied, they grow stronger, and becoming stronger they take hold of their object” (Liturgy of the Hours, Vol III, pg 1544). Do you have desires in life that have not been satisfied? What do you think may be some of the obstacles in the path to fulfilling these desires?

WEEK 3:

The Prayer Relationship

Fr. Tom Elliott

Synopsis: We grow in our relationship with God and experience His scandalously intimate love through the communication we call prayer. Prayer is not a magical bunch of words, nor is it focused on one's self or feelings. Instead, prayer is a necessary, challenging, simple, unique communication and relationship led by God. Sometimes things can get in the way of prayer, especially fatigue, distractions, busyness, anger, fear, and sin.

Optional Small Group Opening Prayer:

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Loving Father, open our hearts right now and fill them with love. Let Your perfect love work its way into every crevice of our lives that is still in darkness. Remind us right now that You cherish us beyond imagining. Every breath we take... is from You. We are grateful that You love us *so* much that You give us each breath. Thank You for holding us in existence with Your love. Give us courage to tear down the walls that keep us from loving more deeply and teach us how to pray, that we will hear You speak Your love to us, and we will reflect that love to the world. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Outline of Talk:

NOTES

- I. The Gospel of Luke, chapter 10:

There was a scholar of the law who stood up to test [Jesus] and said, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “What is written in the law? How do you read it?” He said in reply, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” He replied to him, “You have answered correctly; do this and you will live.” --Luke 10:25-27
- II. Today we are going to look at the essence of our relationship with God.
 - A. Our relationships with spouses, parents, children, friends, coworkers, and classmates can give us an idea of how to define a good relationship.
 1. What are the most important relationships in your life?
 2. Why are they important?
 3. What are the qualities of a good, or important, relationship?
 - B. Most of you probably thought of similar qualities, such as—love, trust, respect, unity, commonality, and maybe even sacrifice. More than likely, the common denominator among all of our answers is love.
 1. The deeper we love, the deeper our relationship is with the one we love.
 2. This is not only true of our relationships with one another, but it is also true of our relationship with God.
- III. We can only love as deeply as we have experienced God's love for us. And, God's love for us is scandalously intimate and deep.

- A. There are many verses in the Bible that speak of God’s scandalously intimate love for us. The Scriptural references for the following ones are listed below:
- “Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved, ah, you are beautiful!”¹ “You are all-beautiful, my beloved and there is no blemish in you.”² “How beautiful you are, how pleasing my love, my delight!”³ “No more shall men call you ‘Forsaken,’ or your land ‘Desolate,’ But you shall be called ‘My Delight,’ and your land ‘Espoused.’”⁴ “[And] though the mountains leave their place and the hills be shaken, My love shall never leave you nor my covenant of peace be shaken.”⁵ “I love you, remain in my love.”⁶
(¹ *Song of Songs 4:1*; ² *Song of Songs 4:7*; ³ *Song of Songs 7:7*; ⁴ *Isaiah 62:4*, ⁵ *Isaiah 54:10*, ⁶ *John 15:9*)
- B. God loves us, not because we’re perfect; not because we’re sinless; not because of what we do for Him; not because we pray for hours; not because we go to Mass every week or every day; not because we serve in the Church; not because He has to... but rather, God loves us because He *chooses* to love us.
1. In the words of Jesus, from the Gospel of John, chapter 15, verse 15—“It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you.” That’s an awesome love!
 2. This is why St. Paul writes to the Romans, “God proves his love for us in that *while we were still sinners* Christ died for us” (*Romans 5:8*).
- C. God brings us into existence through love; He sustains our existence through love; He *desires* for us to be with Him in eternity through love.
- IV. As with all good relationships, our relationship with God deepens through communication. We call our communication with God “prayer.”
- A. In order to understand prayer better, I am going to define it by first stating what prayer is NOT:
1. It is not magic. Prayer is not our *forcing God*, or *making God* do things by special words or gestures.
 2. Prayer is not primarily words.
 3. Prayer is not focused on ones’ self.
 4. Prayer is not a feeling.
- B. Now let’s look at what prayer is.
1. Prayer is regularly necessary.
 2. Prayer is very challenging, from the perspective that relationships are challenging.
 3. Prayer is simple. By simple I don’t mean unimportant or insignificant, but rather, uncomplicated.
 4. Prayer is led by God.
 5. Prayer is unique for everyone.
- V. There are a few problems that frequently arise as we try to deepen our prayer life.
- A. Fatigue
 - B. Distractions
 - C. Busyness
 - D. Anger
 - E. Fear
 - F. Sin

VI. To conclude, let's revisit the Scripture passage we started with:
"You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."

A. This last part, "...and your neighbor as yourself" is the fruit of our prayer.

1. If our prayer, which is our loving communication with God, is authentic then it will continually transform us into more loving men and women.
2. There will be many times when our prayer is such a tremendous struggle that we'll question whether we're "doing it right" or "doing it enough" or whether it is "doing any good." Yet, if we are aware that we are becoming more and more loving, then our prayer is right where it needs to be. There will be many times when our prayer feels very dry and unproductive, yet, we will clearly see that we are becoming more charitable. This is God moving in us.

B. If, however, we are spending a lot of *time* in prayer, but we are not growing in love, then we need to take a closer look at who we're "adoring" in prayer.

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS for WEEK 3

The suggested GRACE to be praying for this week: **TO RECEIVE GOD'S LOVE**

† PRAYER JOURNALING-PART II: A great way to build on the prayer of writing letters to God is to write letters from God back to us.

1. After writing our letter to God, we might ask ourselves, "How would God respond to what I wrote to Him?"
2. Writing much like we would a "stream of consciousness" article, we can begin jotting down sentences of what God might say to us.
3. We are not interested in spelling and proper punctuation, we are simply interested in writing everything that comes to our minds and hearts.
4. While much of what we write will be our own thoughts, there will be times when we will unexpectedly write things that we know were inspired by God.

† Write a letter from God to you, giving Him an opportunity to express the what He loves most about you.

† Here are some Scripture verses and quotes that might also be helpful for prayer this week:

♥ Psalm 46:11

♥ St. John Vianney once said that, during the difficult times, he has only one resource, "to throw [himself] at the foot of the tabernacle like a little dog at the foot of his master."

♥ 1 Thessalonians 5:17

♥ Matthew 6:6

WEEK 4:

Who am I?

Mrs. Nancy Brown

Synopsis: Most of us define our identity by what we do, how we look, who we are related to, what we own, and/or what the world says. Our true identity, however, comes from God. The busyness of life, our fear of who we think we are, and the masks we wear often keep us from listening as God shares with us who we are in His eyes. The quiet of prayer provides the spiritual mirror we need to see and know our true identity.

Optional Small Group Opening Prayer:

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Heavenly Father, in Scripture You say to our hearts, ‘Be still and know that I am God.’¹ We come into the stillness of this moment desiring to know You. As we begin our meeting, may our hearts be focused only on You. Please give each of us the grace to let go of any burdens or stress that may weigh on our hearts at this moment. As we set these things aside, may our hearts be still so that we can listen and be open to receive the gift that You desire each of us to receive. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.”

¹Psalms 46:11

Outline of Talk:

NOTES

- I. The story of the mountain man and his wife reminds us that we often don't recognize ourselves for who we really are.
 - A. The mountain man and his wife in the story did not recognize their reflection in the mirror.
 - B. It is hard for us to imagine not recognizing our own image in a mirror.
 1. We identify ourselves and one another by how we look. We are all aware of our blemishes or disfigurements – our crooked teeth, our need to lose or gain weight, our wrinkles, or bags under our eyes.
 2. We see these things in the mirror and often they occupy our thoughts. They may even define how we see ourselves and each other as pretty or handsome, skinny or fat, tired or youthful, glowing or wrinkled. All of these descriptions are adjectives we use to define ourselves and one another by appearances.
 - C. Other times we identify ourselves by our relationships, starting with our parents and the families into which we were born.
 1. We become son/daughter; sister/brother; niece/nephew; cousin, and so on.
 2. When we marry we become wife/husband; and mother/father.
 - D. We can let the work we do, our degrees, professions or jobs define who we are.
 1. We tend to accept the identity that the world around us has given to us.
 2. We let our appearance, our relationships, our work, or professions define who we are.

3. We identify ourselves by what others have told us about ourselves.
 4. The culture that we live in has lured us into believing that we are identified by the clothes we wear, the house or neighborhood we live in or the car we drive.
 - a. When we can't have the "in" things, we feel "less than" or "not good enough."
 - b. Our children fall victim to this mindset as well. They fear not "fitting in" if they don't wear designer labels or sport the latest gadgets.
 5. Is the world's assessment a TRUE picture of who we are?
- II. Like the mountain man, many of us stay extremely busy just trying to survive.
- A. We go about life working to provide food, clothing and shelter for ourselves and our families.
 - B. The busyness of doing what we consider necessary and acceptable becomes our life.
 1. We buy into the mindset of the world which equates productivity with our worth and acceptance.
 2. We are busy "doing" instead of *being* the person that God intended for us to be.
 3. In living this way, we allow the identity that the world gives us to isolate us from our true identity in Christ.
- III. There are times when life experiences define how we view ourselves.
- A. Past experiences that have been hurtful may be responsible for negative "tapes" that play in our minds and hearts. Anger and resentment from these hurts may control our thoughts, words and actions.
 - B. We may harbor thoughts about being deprived, stupid, less than, not worthy or a misfit.
 1. These are all lies perpetrated by Satan to undermine our relationship with God.
 2. They may also affect how other people see us as well. But do they really say who we are?
- IV. God's view of David, in the first Book of Samuel, chapter 16, can answer the question about who defines us.
- A. This chapter begins with the Lord telling Samuel, the prophet, to go to Jesse of Bethlehem. God had chosen the next king of Israel from among Jesse's sons.
 - B. As each of the sons was brought before Samuel, he observed them. And he heard the Lord say to him, "Do not judge from appearance...Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the Lord looks into the heart."
 - C. In the end, David, the shepherd boy, and the least likely to be chosen, was the one that God chose to be anointed king.
 1. Interestingly, all of David's brothers were more handsome, taller, stronger and more likely by the world's standards to be the king.
 2. Yet, God chose the humble shepherd boy to be king because, according to Scripture, God knew David's heart.

- D. David was the youngest of the eight sons of Jesse. He is described in 1 Samuel as “youthful, ruddy and handsome”... not as a warrior or king.
1. He was mocked by Goliath for his appearance as he came before him in battle. Yet David defeated Goliath because he knew that his strength was in his relationship with the Lord.
 2. David did not become “stuck” in the world’s identification of him. Scripture tell us that God had chosen him to be king.
 3. David’s relationship with the Lord continued to draw him to the identity that God had given to him.
- V. It is hard for most of us to think of allowing anyone to look into our hearts, much less God. Why is this?
- A. Often it is because we have believed those negative tapes that play within us about ourselves.
1. These tapes usually say to us “I am not worthy,” “I can’t measure up,” “I am not good enough,” “I don’t matter,” and so on.
 2. All of these statements reflect lies that we have come to believe about ourselves. And these lies keep most of us from going inward...into our hearts.
 3. Here again the world teaches us to wear masks and to keep our deepest selves hidden. Because of the masks, we live out of what we call our false selves.
 4. More and more, we lose touch with the truth of who God created us to be because we fear taking off the masks.
- VI. In earlier sessions of “My Heart’s Desire” we were reminded that each of us is made in the image and likeness of God.
- A. In Genesis Chapter 1, we are told that when God formed man He breathed into his nostrils. The very Breath of God brought us to life.
- B. In our Baptism this Breath of Life, the Holy Spirit, continues to bring us new life as He comes to dwell in our hearts.
- C. From the very beginning of our existence, God has shown us His desire for a deep heart-to-heart relationship with each one of us.
1. In Isaiah 43:1, we read, “...thus says the Lord, who created you, O Jacob, and formed you, O Israel: Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name: you are mine.”
 2. These words speak of safety and intimacy with our God...He knows our hearts intimately because He created each one of us.
 - a. To create means to bring into existence. It was the Breath and Love of God that created us.
 - b. To form is to fashion, to shape. His Hands fashioned us and continue to shape us.
 - c. To redeem means to set free. It was God’s own Son who redeemed us.
 - d. It is God’s voice, His Word that calls each of us by name.
 - e. God has been intimately and personally involved with us ever since He breathed life into us.

- f. Isaiah 43:1 says “fear not...” God desires to transform our fear of taking off the masks into faith and trust in Him.
- VII. This faith and trust in God grows through time spent alone in the quiet with Him in prayer. It is in those quiet moments with God that we find the mirror that reflects who we truly are.
 - A. Second Corinthians 3:18 tell us, “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.”
 1. Prayer is a journey inward. It is an opportunity to come apart from the world’s voices, to be quiet and to listen for the voice of God in our heart.
 2. This journey inward allows us to connect with who God is. As we open our minds and hearts to Him with “unveiled faces,” we will discover His powerful love at work within us.
 3. As we become more aware of His loving Presence within us, we become more aware of who we are. When we are being nurtured, fed and encouraged in this love, we come to know our true identity in Him.
- VIII. God is inviting us over the next two weeks to come inward to see what He sees by hearing Him lovingly speak to our hearts and address the lies we believe about ourselves, transforming them into the Truth He knows and sees.
 - A. As we pray this week, let us ask the Holy Spirit to give us a new experience of His life, love and Presence within us.
 - B. Ephesians 3:14-19: “For this reason I kneel before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that he may grant you in accord with the riches of his glory to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner self, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS for WEEK 4

The suggested GRACE to pray for during this week: **TO SEE MYSELF AS GOD SEES ME**

- + Using the worksheet on pages 6-7, spend some time prayerfully reflecting on how you have viewed yourself (physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually), whether admiringly or unflatteringly, at the various ages listed in column A and write them in column “F.” Take these images to prayer and ask God what *He* thinks about them.
- + Here are some Scripture verses and quotes that might also be helpful for prayer this week:

♥ Isaiah 43:1

♥ Genesis 17:1-7

♥ Psalm 139

♥ 1 Samuel 16:7

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS for WEEK 5

The suggested GRACE to pray for during this week: **TO HEAR GOD’S TRUTH**

† Using the worksheet on pages 6-7, spend some time prayerfully reflecting on how others have labeled you (physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually) at the various ages listed in column A and make some notes in column “G.” Take these lies to prayer and ask God for His Truth.

† THE PRAYER MANTRA: A mantra is a word or phrase that is repeated over and over slowly in our minds and hearts as a way of quieting ourselves from preoccupations and distractions. Often, as we read Scripture, a word or phrase will “jump out” at us and touch our hearts. We can use these words and phrases in our mantra. Here are a few Scripture verses about God’s truth that might hold some blessed words or phrases we can pray with.

♥ Isaiah 62:2-5

♥ Philippians 1:6

♥ John 14:6

FYI: Below is a list of some excellent books that we recommend for those who are interested in learning more about the topics in this formation program:

<u>AUTHOR</u>	<u>TITLE</u>
Herbert Alphonso	<u>Discovering Your Personal Vocation</u>
George Aschenbrenner	<u>Stretched for Greater Glory</u>
Wilkie Au	<u>By Way of the Heart</u>
William Barry	<u>Paying Attention to God & Seek My Face: Prayer as Personal Relationship in Scripture</u>
Anthony Bloom	<u>Beginning to Pray</u>
Ruth Burrows	<u>Guidelines for Mystical Prayer</u>
Abbot Chapman	<u>Spiritual Letters</u>
Maureen Conroy	<u>The Discerning Heart: Discovering a Personal God</u>
Thomas Dubay	<u>Fire Within & Authenticity: A Biblical Theology of Discernment</u>
John Eldridge	<u>The Journey of Desire</u>
David Fleming	<u>Draw Me Into Your Friendship: The Spiritual Exercises</u>
Thomas H. Green	<u>Opening to God – A Guide to Prayer & When the Well Runs Dry – Prayer Beyond the Beginnings & Weeds Among the Wheat – Discernment: Where Prayer & Action Meet</u>
Thelma Hall	<u>Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina</u>
Thomas Hart	<u>The Art of Christian Listening</u>
Richard J. Hauser	<u>Moving in the Spirit – Becoming a Contemplative in Action</u>
Charles Healey	<u>In Modern Spiritual Writers: Their Legacies of Prayer</u>
Thomas Keating	<u>Crisis of Faith, Crisis of Love & The Better Part: Stages of Contemplative Living</u>
Jerome Kodell	<u>Twelve Keys to Prayer</u>
George Kosicki	<u>Intercession</u>
D. and M. Lynn	<u>Healing Life’s Hurts</u>
Gerald May	<u>The Awakened Heart</u>
Thomas Merton	<u>Contemplative Prayer & New Seeds of Contemplation & The Wisdom of the Desert & Springs of Contemplation</u>
Henri Nouwen	<u>Can You Drink the Cup? & The Way of the Heart & In the Name of Jesus & The Return of the Prodigal Son & The Wounded Healer & The Inner Voice of Love</u>
Basil Pennington	<u>Centering Prayer</u>
Jessica Powers	<u>Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers</u>
Karl Rahner	<u>Encounters with Silence</u>
Ronald Rolheiser	<u>The Holy Longing</u>
William Shannon	<u>Thomas Merton’s Paradise Journey: Writings on Contemplation</u>
Philip Sheldrake	<u>Befriending Our Desires</u>
Mark Thibodeaux	<u>Armchair Mystic: Easing into Contemplative Prayer</u>
Leslie Weatherhead	<u>The Will of God</u>

WEEK 6:

Who is God?

Mrs. Julie Hankins

Synopsis: While every human image of God falls short of capturing His immense love, they can help us to understand Him and grow in a relationship with Him. Our images of God can be spiritually healthy or unhealthy. Healthy images of God always communicate to us God's desire to be near us, whereas unhealthy images say that God is distant. As our relationship with God develops, so too do our images of Him.

Optional Small Group Opening Prayer:

“In the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Father as we search within ourselves to know who You are in our lives, make us aware of Your presence within us. Show us areas of our lives where You have been present, even if we didn't recognize You at the time. Allow us to see ourselves as a one-of-a-kind creation, lovingly knit together with Your own hands. Give us the courage to explore areas of our hearts where we have been hurt and where unforgiveness still remains. Teach us Your truths; hold our hand as our Father, guiding and directing us through the power of Your Holy Spirit. We ask all of this through the intercession of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.”

Outline of Talk:

NOTES

- I. Who Is God? God replied, “I am who am” (Exodus 3:14).
 - A. God is who has always been, as Psalms 90:2 says, “Before the mountains were born, before the earth or the world came to birth, you were God from all eternity and forever.”
 - B. In your workbook, write your response to the following question: Who do you say that God is?
- II. The images that we have of God can be healthy or unhealthy.
 - A. Some of us might call God “Creator,” “Teacher,” or “Parent,” while others might say that He is distant, controlling, or uncaring.
 - B. Together we will look at some of the images we may have of who God is and hopefully come to a better understanding of how our images of God can help us to grow in our relationship with Him.
- III. Most of us would say God is our “Creator.”
 - A. God created man and woman. God breathed His very existence into them.
 1. The Hebrew interpretation of breath is “spirit.” God breathed His spirit into man.
 2. This image could be a positive one for us, or a negative one, depending on how we define, “Creator.”
 - B. The image given to us in the story in Genesis is a positive one.
 1. According to the creation story, God walked with Adam and Eve in the garden. Adam and Eve (man and woman) walked together intimately with God. They spoke to God.

2. I have wondered whether Adam and Eve even had to use words when they communicated with God, or if their hearts spoke to God in ways words couldn't.
 3. God, our loving Creator, wants to have that same close personal relationship with us. Psalm 139 describes our Creator's desire to be close to us when it states that, "[God] knit [us] together in [our] mother's womb."
 - a. The image of God knitting us together teaches us several things.
 - i. Knitters carefully choose the pattern and the yarn.
 - ii. Each stitch is carefully made and a great deal of time and love goes into the work.
 - iii. The yarn ends are not left connected.
 - b. When some people think of God as the Creator, they might imagine that He does not cut the yarn strings; that He created us and still has the strings attached much like a puppet master pulling the strings in our lives.
 - i. With this understanding of God as the Creator, why would we take the time to discover His will for us, since He is going to do whatever He wants whether we like it or not?
 - ii. This way of thinking about God can keep us from seeking the close, personal relationship God truly wants to have with us. We will have the tendency to throw our hands up and say "Why bother trying to seek God's will in my life if I can't change how it is going to turn out?"
 - iii. We might even find ourselves thinking, "Maybe if I go to Mass every week and try my hardest to say prayers and live a good life, God will not let too many bad things happen to me or to those I love."
 - iv. Such thoughts, of course, do not make sense in the light of a healthy understanding of God as our Creator.
 - c. He wants us to desire Him.
 - i. God wants us every minute of everyday. He wants us to share the quiet of the day with Him--the walk in the garden, cool breeze, and great conversation. He doesn't want us to fear Him; He wants us to bring everything to Him. He wants us to seek Him and His will for our lives.
 - ii. When God the Creator, like the knitter, has completed each of His creations, He sets it free and says, "It is good."
- IV. Another image of God that we find in Scripture is, "Teacher."
- A. When we say God is our teacher, we are saying we learn from Him; we listen to Him in order to gain knowledge from Him. We allow Him to be a guide in our lives.
 1. In John 3:2, Nicodemus said to Jesus, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God."

NOTES

2. God sent His Son to earth to teach us of His love. God does teach us if we are willing to learn from Him. We have to come to Him and seek the guidance He offers.
 3. When we teach our children to talk they try so hard to repeat the words we say, and we rejoice when they say anything that sounds close to what it was we were trying to teach them.
 - a. God wants us to come to Him like that small child that desires more than anything to learn what He is trying to teach us.
 - b. Even if it starts out in broken sentences, and we have to keep coming back to hear the words over and over again, He is there and will take us step-by-step until we are ready to move on to the next lesson.
 - c. God rejoices with each step we make and lesson we learn.
 4. Sometimes those small lessons God teaches us come through other people. God shows us His love when He puts people into our lives to help teach us.
 5. At times we may become over-confident in what we think we know, and we move out on our own, like a rebellious teenager.
 6. Sometimes, we start listening to outside voices encouraging us to try this or try that; voices that promise if we obey them it will make us so much smarter than the things we have been taught by God.
 7. We come to Him through contemplation and prayer to seek the guidance He offers.
 8. Part of how He teaches us is that He allows us to experience our own free will choices and the consequences that come from those choices.
 - a. Learning from our mistakes does not always have painful consequences; we can actually experience great joy in learning from our Creator and Teacher even in the midst of mistakes and snags in our lives.
- V. God is also “Healer.”
- A. Have you ever looked closely at something that has been knitted? It is intricately connected. It appears to have no beginning and no end; it is smooth and even. As time goes by, a snag can occur which causes a mark that may or may not be visible. It may or may not affect the knitting. Unfortunately, as time goes by more snags occur; maybe people will try to fix them, or possibly some are so hidden that we ourselves don’t even know they are there. As the knitted item is worn, the snags may start to show because they have gotten bigger and no amount of human mending can help.
 - B. As knitted creations, you and I experience snags as well.
 1. In our lives, some of those snags could be wounds we call “abandonment,” “betrayal,” “rejection,” and “loss.”
 2. While God originally knit us in perfection, we become snagged. God, however, is the divine healer, the mender of snags, and He asks us to come to Him and allow Him to knit us back together.

VI. God loves like a perfect parent.

- A. As parents we want only the best for our children and would do just about anything for them.
 1. For example, parents try to protect their children from physical and emotional hurts. Yet, many children still get hurt, especially by the things that classmates say and do. These hurts are like snags in God's knitting and can influence their choices in the future.
 2. The hurtful words of one classmate can drive a child to seek attention and acceptance from other classmates, sometimes leading them to make bad choices.
 3. Thankfully, for every emotionally hurtful snag, there is God's voice, spoken through the Holy Spirit and the people God placed in children's lives, especially their parents.
 - a. Deep inside the girl's heart, she may hear the guiding words spoken to her by her parents as she was growing up, "You are beautiful," "I love you," "I am proud of you."
 - b. Just as the words of a parent can heal the hurtful words of a classmate, God's word spoken to us can heal the snags of our lives. And, just as the words of a parent sometimes don't keep the child from making bad choices, we, as God's children, often make mistakes.
- B. Children often choose differently than they have been taught by their parents; yet, parents never stop loving their children.
- C. God, as the Divine Parent, remains with us and continues to guide us and love us, even when we make poor choices.

VII. Healthy images of God always communicate to us God's desire to be near us, whereas unhealthy images say that God is distant, that He is too far away.

- A. Healthy images remind us that God created us in our mothers' wombs—special, uniquely formed one-of-a-kind beings.
- B. Unhealthy images present a God who sits in His mansion in heaven and allows His creatures to be on their own as though His job was complete.
 1. As Thomas Green explains this in his book, Weeds Among the Wheat, writing:

“So it is with the ‘watchmaker’ idea of God: He created the world and left the stamp of his skill and being on it, but he no longer has any direct connection with his creation. From that creation, we could learn something about him (as we could about the watchmaker), but we could not know him personally or enter into a direct personal relationship with him.”
 2. Thankfully, there are far better images of God that speak to our hearts about His love for us.
 - a. For example, in Matthew 28:20 we hear Jesus instruct:

“Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you. And know that I am with you always, until the end of world!”

NOTES

- b. God is with us. He doesn't create us and then leave us. He is not far away because He has sent the Holy Spirit to reside within us always. In that inner most part of our being is God's Breath. We may choose to ignore His presence and His still, soft voice, but He never leaves us. He waits, like a loving Creator, patient Teacher, and guiding Parent; never pushy or demanding, just present waiting for us to open our hearts to the gift of His unconditional love.

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS for WEEK 6

The suggested GRACE to pray for during this week: **TO KNOW GOD MORE INTIMATELY**

- † Using the worksheet on pages 6-7, spend some time prayerfully reflecting on how you have viewed God throughout your life and how those images have changed. Write the predominant image of God for each block in column "A" in column "H." Take these images to prayer and reflect on how they drew you closer to God or how they may have limited who God was for you.

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS for WEEK 7

The suggested GRACE to pray for during this week: **TO SEE GOD IN A NEW WAY**

- † What image(s) of God speak(s) to you at this moment in your life? Here is a list of some of the most common names for God in the Bible. Spend time this week prayerfully reading through this list and see if any of the names speak to your heart (While you do not have to look up each of these Scriptural references, they are listed below in case you feel led to explore any of them).

Father (Matthew 6:9)	Emmanuel, "God with us" (Matt. 1:23)	Great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14)
Power (Mark 14:62)	Teacher/Rabbi (Matthew 23:8)	Guardian Of Our Souls (1 Pet. 2:25)
God Of Glory (Acts 7:2)	Chief Cornerstone (Mark 12:10)	Advocate (1 John 2:1)
Creator (Romans 1:20,25)	Sunrise From On High (Luke 1:78)	Faithful Witness (Revelation 1:5)
Daddy/Abba (Romans 8:15)	Expected One (Luke 7:19)	Lion Of Judah (Revelation 5:5)
Father of Mercies (2 Cor. 1:3)	Master (Luke 8:24)	The First And The Last (Rev. 22:13)
God Of All Comfort (2 Cor. 1:3)	Bridegroom (John 3:29)	Holy Spirit (Luke 3:16)
Living God (2 Cor. 3:3)	Savior (John 4:42)	Helper (John 14:26)
Lord Almighty (2 Cor. 6:18)	Bread Of Life (John 6:35)	Comforter (John 14:26)
Messiah (Col. 1:3, John 1:41)	Light Of The World (John 8:12)	Healer (Exodus 15:26b)
Eternal King (1 Timothy 1:17)	I AM (John 8:58)	Love (1 John 4:16b)
Sovereign (1 Timothy 6:15)	Door (John 10:7)	Maker (Psalm 139)
Majesty (Hebrews 1:3)	Good Shepherd (John 10:11)	Redeemer (Isaiah 54:5)
Most High (Hebrews 7:1)	Resurrection (John 11:25)	Wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:24)
Consuming Fire (Hebrews 12:29)	Life (John 11:25)	Head Over All Things (Eph. 1:22)
Peace (Hebrews 13:20)	True Vine (John 15:1)	Firstborn Of All Creation (Col. 1:15)
Lawgiver (James 4:12)	Holy One (Acts 3:14)	Word (John 1:1)
Judge (James 4:12)	Servant (Acts 4:27)	Lamb of God (John 1:36)
Lord Of Armies (James 5:4)	The Deliverer (Romans 11:26)	Chosen One (Luke 9:35)
	Living One (Luke 24:5)	

WEEK 8:

For this is the Will of My Father

Deacon Chuck Hankins

Synopsis: There are many times in life when we question why God lets bad things happen and what His plan is for our lives. These questions invite us into the reality of freewill and God's will. While we can never fully comprehend the mystery of God's will, we can come to a better understanding of it by looking at three important aspects—intentional will, circumstantial will, and ultimate will.

Optional Small Group Opening Prayer:

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. God our Father, we sometimes struggle with understanding Your will for us. Even when we know Your will, it is sometimes hard to accept it. We pray that as we study Your will and how to discern Your will, our ears will be open to hear, our minds open to understand, and our hearts open to accept. May we come to a better understanding of Your divine plan for us and grow ever closer to You. We ask all of this through Christ our Lord. Amen”

Outline of Talk:

NOTES

- I. When something bad happens, many people ask questions like, “Why did God let this happen?” The deeper question that only a few are brave enough to ask out loud is: “Why did God do this?”
 - A. If God is all-powerful, then doesn't He know when tragedies are going to happen, and can't He prevent them?
 1. When faced with an illness or injury, people sometimes slip into a mistaken belief that their all-powerful God actually knew this tragedy was going to occur and didn't prevent it.
 2. This misunderstanding leads them to an even more chilling question. Surely it would be perceived as an evil act if someone knew that harm was going to come to someone, they had the power to prevent it, and chose to let it happen anyway. Surely God, the source of all that is good, cannot be doing evil, can He? But how do we explain bad situations any other way? Is there a way to explain them?
- II. While we may not ever fully know or understand the answers to these questions, I recently read a book called *The Will of God*, by Leslie D. Weatherhead, that helps explain how God can be all-powerful, and yet bad things can happen and it is not the result of God doing evil.
 - A. While we cannot fully grasp the mystery of God's plan, Weatherhead gives us some insight into it by explaining that God can be described as having three wills: *Intentional Will*, *Circumstantial Will*, and *Ultimate Will*.
 1. God's *intentional* will is His ideal plan for each of us.
 2. His *circumstantial* will is the plan He has for us within certain circumstances, which change as we and others make freewill choices.
 3. God's *ultimate* will is the final realization of His purpose for each of us.

- B. An illustration of how these operate will help us understand God's will and its interaction with our freewill.
1. Let's say a trickle of water starts at the top of a perfectly smooth slope. It will normally go straight to the bottom. That would be an example of God's intentional will, the ideal, His original plan for how we will live out our lives.
 2. Picture that a trickle of water is making its perfectly straight way to the bottom of a perfectly smooth slope. Then, a small pebble is placed in its path. The trickle of water is no longer able to travel on a perfectly straight course to the bottom of the slope. The pebble can change the original intention of the trickle of water to travel to the bottom of the slope in a straight line just as freewill choices can change God's original plan that we always live in a love relationship with the Lord and our neighbors and never experience sin, sadness, or tragedy.
- C. Like when the trickle of water meets the pebble, God's original plan for our lives, His intentional will, can be changed by freewill choices. But, that is not the end of the story.
1. The water trickle doesn't just stop when it meets the pebble; it changes course. It goes to one side or the other, or with enough force, even pushes the pebble to the side, and then resumes its course to the bottom of the slope. It goes around the obstacle. This is not the original course of the water, nor the intentional will of God, but the course to the side represents the *circumstantial* will of God. It is the way to get the trickle of water started back down the slope.
 2. God's *circumstantial* will is that which is necessary to get us on our way toward God's *ultimate* will when the course of His intentional will has been inadvertently changed.
- D. So, we see that God's *intentional* will, can be changed by our free choices. God's *circumstantial* will can be changed by our free choices, also. The freewill choices of others have consequences on our lives and our freewill choices affect *others* as well. Someone else can place a pebble in the way of the trickle of water on its way to the bottom of the slope and cause the course of the water to change.
- III. If freewill is such a problem—if it can actually change God's intentional and circumstantial will— why did He give it to us? Or, having given it to us, can He take it back?
- A. Well, God can't. He gave us freewill so that we can authentically *love* Him. Love ceases to be love once freewill is tampered with; and, if God's ultimate will for all of us is that we know His love and return it, then freewill must always receive the greatest respect.
- B. A person cannot truly love God if there is not an option to reject God's love. God must give us that option.
- IV. The trickle of water will always get to the bottom of the slope no matter how many times it must detour on the way. God's ultimate will cannot be defeated, unless we choose to reject His plan for us. But what is God's ultimate will?

- A. “For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him (on) the last day” (John 6:40).
 - 1. God’s ultimate will is LIFE. The first thing the Bible tells us is that He created the world and all that is in it. He gave man dominion over creation so that man might sustain himself.
 - 2. Then came the Fall. Once again, God acted to create life, eternal life, by giving His Son on the Cross. His two most singular acts in all of history were to give man Life. God’s ultimate will for us cannot be defeated by the freewill and sinfulness of other people.
- B. In answer the original question, “Can God do evil things?” we can say that when evil things occur, it is the result of freewill choices we have made, freewill choices others have made or combinations of all of them.
 - 1. Let’s apply what we have learned to another example: A young man is paralyzed from the waist down due to a motor vehicle accident. Was it God’s *intentional* will that this man have to live out a large portion of his life with limited use of his body, battling depression, pain, long hospitalizations and repeated surgical and medical procedures? Of course not! Then how is this not “God’s will” that he be this way?
 - 2. Certainly this man now has more than a “pebble” thrown in the course of his life. God’s *intentional* will for him has changed due to the cumulative effect of freewill choices made by him and countless others. Each of us is impacted by the choices made by others. God’s *ultimate* will for him has not changed due to this tragedy. God’s *circumstantial* will for him has, and it will be his challenge to discern what that will is now. The tragedy wasn’t God’s will, but there is God’s will, God’s *circumstantial* will, as a result of the tragedy.
- V. Freewill, gift though it is, comes with a responsibility. We are responsible for using our freewill in accordance with the three aspects of God’s will.
 - A. In order to know what choices are consistent with God’s will, we must seek His guidance. This is done through a process called discernment.
 - 1. Discernment draws upon prayer, Scripture, and Church teaching to determine what God’s will is for us in a particular circumstance.
 - 2. Sometimes, discernment is so clear and easy that we don’t even realize that we have done it. When a person angers us and we have a choice to respond with anger, perhaps even violence, or we can respond with quiet words and diffuse the situation, we know what God’s will is in that circumstance without much formal discernment. However, many situations are not so clear.
 - a. St. Ignatius of Loyola describes three modes of knowing God’s will— 1) when we clearly know what God wants based on an extraordinary experience (like Saul getting knocked off his horse), 2) through Sacred Scripture, Church teaching, and/or

evaluating the situation and gathering all of the necessary background information, and 3) prayerfully meditating on the details of the discernment and spending time listening to God's response. But, there's another step:

- b. The famous Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, explains this, writing: "Yet, if we add all these indications together, they seldom suffice to give us absolute certitude that God wills one thing to the exclusion of every other. He who loves us means by this to leave us room for our own freedom, so that we may dare to choose for ourselves, with no other certainty than that His love will be pleased by our intention to please Him" (No Man is an Island, Thomas Merton, Barnes and Noble Books, 2003, pg. 133). In other words, it is our prayerful, discerning CHOICE that is the final piece of the puzzle of discernment.
- c. Weatherhead says: "If we do faithfully that which we see to be the will of God in the circumstances which evil thrusts upon us, we can rest our minds in the assurance that circumstances which God allows, reacted to in faith and trust and courage, can never defeat purposes which God ultimately wills" (The Will of God, Leslie D. Weatherhead, pg. 46).

VI. Freewill is a precious gift, without which we could not choose to love God. Freewill comes with the responsibility to discern God's *circumstantial* will for us in our current circumstances. God will not prevent us from using our freewill, even if the choices are unwise and bring harm to ourselves or others. Therefore He does not choose to allow bad things to happen to us. When bad things happen, it is NOT "God's will."

- A. As you can see, we already know what God's *intentional* will for us is: that we be born, raised in a loving environment, grow in wisdom and understanding and always live in a love relationship with the Lord and our neighbors and die of old age, having never experienced sin, sadness, or tragedy. We already know that God's *ultimate* will for us is: that we have LIFE. Life eternal, won for us by the sacrifice of His Son on the cross.
- B. What we don't know so clearly is His *circumstantial* will. That is because it changes, just as the course of the water trickle changes, with the obstacles put in its path by the freewill choices we make and the freewill choices made by others.
- C. In the well known Scripture verse, John 3:16, we are told, "For God so loved the world that he gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but might have eternal life."
- D. The God who loves us so much as to offer His only begotten Son for us can not bring or cause evil to happen to us, but instead loves us more deeply than we can possibly imagine.

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS for WEEK 8

The suggested GRACE to pray for during this week: **TO DESIRE TO LIVE GOD’S WILL**

† The Serenity Prayer, by Reinhold Niebuhr (d. 1971)

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference; living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardships as the pathway to peace. Taking as Jesus did this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it, trusting that he will make all things right if I surrender to his will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him forever in the next.

♥ What area of my life or current situation do I need to place more trustingly into God hands? Visit with God or prayer journal about these things.

† The Prayer of Saint Ignatius of Loyola (d. 1556)

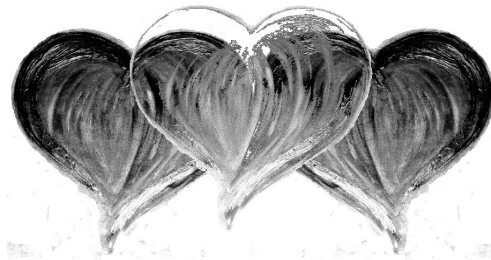
Lord Jesus Christ, take all my freedom, my memory, my understanding, and my will. All that I have and cherish You have given to me. I surrender it all to be guided by Your will. Your grace and Your love are wealth enough for me. Give me these, Lord Jesus, and I ask for nothing more.

♥ What would be the hardest thing for me to surrender right now in my life?

† *Challenge:* Before buying something (today or this week), pray and ask God whether He wants you to have it.

† An adaptation from Psalm 116:

How shall I make a return to my loving God
for all the good that I have been given?
The cup of salvation I will take up,
and I will call upon the name of my God;
My vows to the Holy One I will pay
in the presence of all the people.
My God, I am your servant....
To you will I offer sacrifice of thanksgiving,
and I will call upon your name.
My vows to you I will pay
In the presence of all your people,
In the courts of the house O God,
in your midst, O Jerusalem.



WEEK 9:

Missing the Mark

Fr. Tom Elliott

Synopsis: Sin is when we refuse to live the will of God; when we “miss the mark,” by living in a less than human way. True holiness consists in living the unique pattern of Christ that God created us to be. True sorrow for our sins comes from a deep awareness of who we are in Christ, as well as an understanding of God’s love. Understanding the subtlety of the seven capital sins can lead us toward reconciliation and give us insight into how to grow in our relationship with God.

Optional Small Group Opening Prayer:

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Father, we ask for Your forgiveness for all of the times we have not lived Your will. Please look past the brokenness of our selfishness and see the desire that we have for You. We love You, Father. Help us to be able to pray that beautiful prayer of St. Ignatius of Loyola with sincerity: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, take all of my freedom, my memory, my understanding, and my will. All that I have and cherish You have given to me. I surrender it all to be guided by Your will. Your grace and Your love are wealth enough for me. Give me these, Lord Jesus, and I ask for nothing more.’ Amen.”

Outline of Talk:

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“Then going out [Jesus] went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. When he arrived at the place he said to them, ‘Pray that you may not undergo the test.’ After withdrawing about a stone’s throw from them and kneeling, he prayed, saying, ‘Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done’” (Luke 22:39-42).

- I. The word sin literally means, “to miss the mark.” The “mark” always being two integrated things—God’s will and our authentic humanity.
 - A. As we heard in previous talks, God made humanity in His image and likeness and declared us “good.” Have you ever heard someone excuse their sinfulness with the phrase, “I’m only human”? For some reason, many people have a distorted view of their humanity as something tainted, bad, and unholy. In reality, the opposite is true.
 - B. As human beings we are holy and good. When we sin, we are being less than human; we are being false. We’re missing the mark.
 - C. True holiness, then, consists in our being completely who God created us to be—a unique pattern, or example, of Jesus Christ.
 1. This is what allowed St. Paul to write in Galatians 2:20, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”
 2. The way we come to know how God wants us to live out that unique pattern of His Son is through our prayerful relationship with Him. This relationship with God will

gently purify us and make us more authentic, which is the journey of sainthood.

- II. Most of us hate to think about our sinfulness. Our sins are often the voices we hear in our heads telling us that we are “worthless,” “unlovable,” and “bad.”
- A. True contrition—that is, truly being sorry for our sins—has very little to do with these “voices of sin” that play in our mind, and has everything to do with *God’s voice* reminding us about our goodness. In other words, it’s not so much our sinfulness that leads us to contrition and reconciliation, but rather, it’s God’s awesome love for us.
- B. There are two extreme experiences of contrition that are not healthy to our understanding of who we are in Christ.
1. The first is scrupulosity. From my own experience, scrupulous people tend to be older men and women who grew up in a church with very strict guidelines and definitions as to what holiness entails, without encouragement to let God love them. They view their sins in a very militaristic way and beat themselves up over every single thing they’ve done wrong. Often, when they come to Confession, they quickly mumble through their sins like a laundry list, hoping that their penance will be an easy one. They are frustrated and embarrassed that they keep coming to the Sacrament of Reconciliation with the same sins and many of them have given up hope of ever overcoming their “awful transgressions.” While they intellectually know that God loves them, the idea that they are cherished by Him *just as they are* is difficult to grasp. In their hearts they feel like they are only truly loved by God when they aren’t sinfully messing things up. They fear dying; or should I say, they fear dying right after sinning because God is just waiting for them to mess up so He can send them to hell.
 2. Then there’s the other side of the contrition coin—apathy. Apathetic people were often raised in a time when God was described as not much more than love. There were very few rules and guidelines and the moral compass in life was quite relative. God’s job is to forgive sins, and people give Him a lot of sins to forgive. There’s really no need to overcome sin since God needs the work. It’s job-security for God. These people tend to go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation very, very infrequently. When they do attend church, they make sure the minister does not challenge the comfortable place their conscience is in. They don’t fear death nearly as much as other people because they believe pretty much everyone will go to heaven.
- C. The problem with both of these extreme views of contrition is that they take our relationship with God out of the picture. Recognizing our sin and letting the Lord purify our lives has nothing to do with avoiding hell or getting into heaven! It has to do with love.
1. For example, let’s say a man has been smoking for years when he marries his wife. He knows she doesn’t like his bad habit, but she’s never really screamed at him to quit.

Should he wait until his wife gives him an ultimatum? “Either you quit smoking or we’re getting a divorce!” Or, will he desire to quit when he comes to a deep understanding of his wife’s love for him and his love for his wife? Ideally, that would be the case.

2. The same is true with God. He doesn’t threaten, scream, whine, or give ultimatums. Instead, He loves us. God hopes that His love for us is so overwhelming that we will desire nothing more than to give Him *everything*... including our brokenness.

III. For the sake of looking at the subtlety of our false selves, let’s briefly look at the seven capital sins. These brief glimpses into sin will give us food for prayer and reflection throughout the upcoming weeks. They also provide us with a good starting place for an examination of conscience. I am going to rely heavily upon the thoughts and insights of Mother Nadine, the superior for the Intercessors of the Lamb religious community, as we briefly go through the seven capital sins.

A. PRIDE: The sin of pride is essentially our trying to be more than we really are. Pride drives us to “wrap” ourselves with everything and anything that seems good and holy so that other people think more highly of us, or at the very least so they don’t see who we really are.

1. Pride is such a powerful sin that the Israelites portrayed it as the *first* sin in the story of Adam and Eve. In that story the serpent tells the two of them that they will be “like God” if they eat from the forbidden tree (Genesis 3:1-5). Wanting to be more than they really were, they ate the fruit.
2. Pride is a distortion, then, of our true nature. Humility, on the other hand, keeps us balanced between knowing that we are merely dust, as Genesis 3:19 tells us, and knowing that we are God’s children, as we read in 1 John 3:2.
3. Some common ways pride manifests itself are:
 - a. Intellectual Pride, when we seek to obtain knowledge or information that other people don’t have so that they will think more highly of us.
 - b. Storytelling Pride, when we embellish stories so that we come out looking really good in the end.
 - c. Spiritual Pride or Scrupulosity, when we are overzealous in our religious convictions, especially when it’s done in the sight of other people.
 - d. The Pride of Authority, when we are arrogant, critical, argumentative and conceited in rejecting the opinions and counsels of others.
 - e. The Pride of Oversensitivity, when we draw attention to ourselves and even control other people by being oversensitive, over-emotional, and melodramatic.
 - f. False Humility, when we constantly put ourselves down and are unable to accept a compliment so that others will praise us more.

- B. GREED (also known as Avarice): The sin of greed is fundamentally our attempt to control things. Acquiring and possessing things gives us a sense of security and control.
1. Greed show itself in many ways. It can appear as 1) materialism, 2) a desire for what we don't have, 3) an immature attitude about what we do have (sort of the "It's mine!" attitude), 4) an attachment to religious devotions, practices, articles, or even a particular pew in church, 5) a need to know what God is doing—always seeking details, and being impatient with the speed with which God does things.
- C. SLOTH: The capital sin of sloth is the need to avoid duty. It has very little to do with whether or not we're doing something, and everything to do with *what* we're doing. Sloth is when we aren't doing what God wants us to be doing at any given moment.
1. In the United States, the sin of sloth is most commonly found in our busyness rather than laziness. We tend to busy ourselves with everything except what we need to be doing.
 2. Martha, from the famous Martha and Mary story in the Gospel of Luke, is a great Scriptural example of this. While what she was doing was wonderful and generous, it was not the "better part" (Luke 10:38-42).
 3. Busyness isn't the only way sloth can manifest itself. It can also appear as: 1) procrastination, 2) criticalness, 3) fatigue, 4) withdrawal, 5) complacency, and 6) tardiness.
- D. GLUTTONY: The sin of gluttony is fundamentally the need to avoid pain. It is not limited to overeating (as most people define it), but encompasses everything we do in excess in an attempt to fill the void we feel in our hearts.
1. We don't want to feel the pain of abuse, separation, divorce, grief, loneliness, etc., so we turn toward pleasurable things. We also don't want to feel spiritual pain—the cross of Christ, so we fill ourselves with other things so that we can't be filled with sacrificial love.
 2. However, there is a reason why God allows us to feel a void in our lives. There is a reason why we hunger and thirst for something this world can't provide.
- E. ENVY: The sin of envy is essentially the desire for God to do for us what He's doing for other people. We become so concerned with what God is doing in other people's lives that we lose sight of what He's doing with *us*. Envy denies the unique love that God has for each of us.
1. There are two popular forms of envy among Christians.
 - a. The first is when we envy those who get to do bad things and don't seem to be bothered by their conscience. While we know in our heads that being Christian brings peace, joy, and contentment, we don't always feel it in our hearts. There are times when we don't see the immediate fruit of being a follower of Christ. There are times when we are tired of "being good," and we envy those who are blatantly bad.

- b. The second type of Christian envy is directed toward those who appear to be more advanced in faith than we are. It is so easy to think that God is doing more in other people's lives than in our own. In actuality, we all experience God in different ways, and He loves each of us the same amount, but uniquely.
- F. LUST: The capital sin of lust is our letting the flames of passion get out of control. Better put, it is our refusal to accept and properly integrate the gift of sexuality God has given us. Lust is our denial of the human incompleteness that's part of living.
1. Some of the more obvious manifestations of lust are—fornication, adultery, incest, masturbation, pornography and contraception.
 2. Some of the less obvious ones are—sensuality, immodesty, attachment, excessiveness, anger, indiscrimination, curiosity, and frustration.
 3. Ultimately, all lust is rooted in the frustration we feel about being incomplete. The author, Ronald Rolheiser, put a voice to this frustration, asking, “How do we live in an incomplete world without demanding that our lives, our spouses, our friends, our homes, our vocations, and our jobs give us something that they cannot ultimately give, namely... full consummation?” (The Holy Longing, p. 204.)
- G. ANGER: The capital sin of anger is rooted in our desire to have things done perfectly, according to what we consider perfect.
1. There are two types of anger, one is a sin and the other is not. The reason why all anger is not a sin is because anger is an emotion, and emotions are gifts from God. Emotions tell us a lot about what God wants to heal in us and how God wants us to respond to the things going on in our lives and in the world. Some people have suggested that anger is only a sin when we act on it, but that's not necessarily true. What makes the emotion of anger a sin is self-righteousness.
 - a. Righteous anger comes from God. It is an emotion that tells us that something has been done that is against the desire and will of God. It may give us the conviction we need to say or do what God desires.
 - i. An example of this would be Jesus' response to the crowd, in the Gospel of Mark chapter three verses 4-5, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” [Jesus] looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart.”
 - b. Self-righteous anger is selfish. It is not concerned with God's will, but our own will. This most often occurs when we don't get what we want, or when others don't do what we want them to.
 2. When we don't allow God to heal our anger, it can manifest itself in many ways.

NOTES

3. Some of the most common manifestations of anger are resentment, wrath, mockery, negativity, sarcasm, sadness/depression, rebellion, impatience, and unbelief. Self-righteous anger has nothing to do with what's "right" or "wrong," but with what *I* want and what *I* think is correct.
- IV. Which leads us back to the Scripture we began with, "Father, not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). As God's love draws us closer to Him, the light of His awesome love will illuminate the dark places of our hearts that need healing and forgiveness. God loves us as we are, but desires for us to know and love ourselves and others as He created us.

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS for WEEK 9

The suggested GRACE to pray for during this week: **TO COURAGEOUSLY CONFRONT MY SINFULNESS**

- + Using the worksheet on pages 6-7, spend some time prayerfully reflecting on the various sins that you have struggled with in your life. You might want to categorize them under the Seven Capital sins or write them out more specifically in column "I."
- + The "second week" of St. Ignatius of Loyola's spiritual exercises focuses on helping us grow in our knowledge and love of Jesus Christ so that we might model our lives upon His life. Saint Ignatius offers a meditation on the "three classes of men" to help us to understand the attachment that we need to let go of in order to grow in Christ. He describes them as such:
 1. The first class of people are those who find themselves attached to a lot of things in life and would like to free themselves from these attachments, but they never get around to doing it. They still find themselves ruled by money, possessions, people, and past memories.
 2. The second class of people also want to free themselves from attachments, but they want to do it in such a way as to be able to keep everything that they possess.
 3. The third class wishes to be free of attachments and they do not care whether they retain the objects of their attachments or not. They simply want whatever God wants.
 - ♥ With these three classes, or types, of people in mind, pray what St. Ignatius calls a "colloquy," where we simply talk to the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, like we would to a friend, and share with God what type of person we think we are and what we find ourselves attached to the most. You might want to journal some of the insights that came to you during this prayer.
- + THE JESUS PRAYER: In order to enter more deeply into the life of prayer and to come to grips with St. Paul's challenge to pray unceasingly, many Christians use what is commonly called the, "Jesus Prayer," which is sometimes called the prayer of the heart. The Jesus Prayer is offered as a means of concentration, as a focal point for our inner life. Though there are both longer and shorter versions, the most frequently used form of the Jesus Prayer is: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."
 - ♥ You might want to pray the "Jesus Prayer" while you slowly look through the sins that you listed in column 'I' of the "Journey of Desire" worksheet.

† THE CHAPLET OF DIVINE MERCY: The Chaplet of Divine Mercy is a simple prayer that uses the beads of the Rosary to focus one’s meditation on God’s mercy. The phrase prayed most often in this chaplet is, “For the sake of His sorrowful passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world.”

♥ You might want to pray this simple sentence as a way of bringing past sins and struggles before the Lord.

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS for WEEK 10

The suggested GRACE to pray for during this week: **TO ENTRUST MY WEAKNESSES TO GOD**

† Most people believe that, while He does not cause bad things to happen, God can and does transform bad situations into blessings. Thomas Green, in his book, Weeds Among the Wheat, takes this belief a little further and states that God can even use the sins we struggle with to draw us closer to Him. He uses the parable of the weeds and wheat found in Matthew 13:24-30 to explain this idea, writing, “When we understand the parable in this way, as referring to the field which is the soul of the Christian, we can see that some at least of our instinctual and involuntary weaknesses are likely to remain in us until the harvest time of death. The Lord leaves them in us to keep us humble, to make us realize how totally we depend on him and how helpless we are to do good without his grace and his power. The wheat of our virtues— trust, humility, gratitude, zeal—could not come to full maturity, it seems, without the weeds of our instinctual failings” (Ave Maria Press, 1984, pg. 145). With this in mind, God invites us to surrender our weakness to Him. The following Scripture verses might be helpful in meditating on how God has transformed your weaknesses and sins into opportunities to grow in humility and love.

♥ 2 Corinthians 4:6-10

♥ 2 Corinthians 12:6-9

♥ Luke 5:5-8

♥ John 2:6-10

♥ 1 Kings 17:7-16

† Most Catholics are familiar with the “Act of Contrition,” a prayer where we express two important aspects of contrition— our sorrow for our sins and our desire for God to help us in the future not to sin again. Listed below are some beautiful Scripture verses on forgiveness. You might want to spend some time prayerfully reflecting on them and then write your own “act of contrition.”

♥ Jeremiah 31:34

♥ Ezekiel 36:24-28

♥ Colossians 3:12-15

♥ Ephesians 4:28-32

♥ Luke 7:44-47

WEEK 11:

Reconciliation

Fr. Tom Elliott

Synopsis: Reconciliation is a necessary and normal part of our lives. Saint Peter's denial and reconciliation with Christ teaches us about the role of our desire and identity, as well as God's identity, in reconciliation. Since sin is communal, so is reconciliation. The Sacrament of Reconciliation demonstrates this fact. There are several blessings associated with Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Optional Small Group Opening Prayer:

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Father of mercies, accept our humble and contrite hearts. Your love and mercy give us hope and life. You don't wait for us to become perfect; You ask us to come to You as we are. Accept us now, together with Your Son, who has made us Your beloved children. We ask all of this in His name, for He is Lord for ever and ever. Amen.”

Outline of Talk:

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- I. Reconciliation is a normal and necessary part of our Christian journey. It is the place where our inevitable sinfulness meets God's indescribable love and mercy.
 - A. Reconciliation permeates our entire lives, like oxygen, invisible, but present, just waiting to be inhaled and exhaled. Like breathing, reconciliation is not only essential, it is an everyday experience.
 - B. The word “reconcile” literally means to “make consistent.”
 1. Using this definition, we can understand sin as our being *inconsistent* with who God made us to be or being inconsistent in our relationship with Him.
 2. When we become aware of this inconsistency, our loving desire for the God who has first loved us draws us back into consistency. This ebb and flow makes up our relationship with God.
 - C. Each sin gives us an opportunity to better understand who we are and who God is and so offers us, through reconciliation, a deeper relationship with Him.
 1. In no way do I mean to say that sin is something we should strive for, but rather, if our sins are followed by reconciliation, then God uses even our sins to draw us closer to Him.
 2. St. Paul explained this, writing, “What then shall we say? Shall we persist in sin that grace may abound? Of course not!” (Romans 6:1).
 3. If sin is a common part of our lives, then reconciliation—making our relationship with God more consistent—must also be.
- II. Saint Peter is a wonderful example of the importance of reconciliation and how it fits together with all of the other spiritual topics we have been praying about and studying.

- A. The author of the Gospel of John intended for his readers to make the connection between Peter's three denials and Jesus' three questions about love, and most people do. However, I am going to take these two stories from John, chapters 13 and 21, a little deeper than the author may have intended for them to go in order to show some of the spiritual aspects we've become familiar with and to better understand how reconciliation is normal and essential.
- B. We began a number of weeks ago with a look at our desires. Peter had desires. His deepest desire was to love and serve Jesus. In John 13:37 he expresses that desire saying, "Master, I will lay down my life for you." Jesus responds to him by saying, "Will you lay down your life for me? Amen, amen, I say to you, the cock will not crow before you deny me three times." Peter was hurt and confused by Jesus' response. He could not imagine himself denying or rejecting Jesus. Yet, this is precisely what he did.
- C. Remember our prayer and discussions about the importance of knowing our true identity as well as the importance of knowing God? Peter seemed to forget both of these things. John chapter 18 relates the story, saying:
- "The maid who was the gatekeeper said to Peter, 'You are not one of this man's disciples, are you?' He said, 'I am not.' Now Simon Peter was standing there keeping warm. And they said to him, 'You are not one of his disciples, are you?' He denied it and said, 'I am not.' One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the one whose ear Peter had cut off, said, 'Didn't I see you in the garden with him?' Again Peter denied it. And immediately the cock crowed." The Gospel of Matthew actually gives words to Peter's denial with, "I do not know the man!"
- D. Having denied Jesus, as well as himself, Peter missed the mark; he sinned and needed to be reconciled with the One whom he loved more than life itself. Jesus renews their relationship by giving Peter an opportunity to once again declare his love and recognize his identity:
- Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He then said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was distressed that he had said to him a third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." (Jesus) said to him, "Feed my sheep."
- E. Reconciliation for Peter meant being given the opportunity to recognize who Jesus is, profess his deepest desire for Jesus, and come to understand, in a deeper way, who he was as a shepherd of God's sheep.

1. As we can see from this narrative, reconciliation came, not so much from Peter's sinfulness, but rather, from Jesus' desire for Peter to know and love Him and to know himself.
 2. The same is true for each one of us. It is not so much our sins that lead us into reconciliation with God, but His love for us and His desire for us to know and love Him. In this way, reconciliation will always be a normal and necessary part of our relationship with God until we see Him and ourselves with perfect clarity—and we call that “heaven.”
 - a. Paul said this best when he wrote, “At present we see dimly, as in a mirror, but [later we will see] face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12).
- III. Not only is reconciliation normal and necessary, it is also communal. The very fact that sin is communal demands that reconciliation also be communal.
- A. Jews and Christians believe that, while an individual can sin, sin can never be merely individual. Sin always affects others, even if no one but the sinner knows about the sin.
1. This is because we are all spiritually joined together. To use the language of Saint Paul, we are the Body of Christ, “if (one) part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy” (1 Cor. 12:26).
 2. In this way, our sins not only show an inconsistency in our relationship with God, but they separate us from the community of believers. They sever our spiritual union with the Body of Christ. Reconciliation heals that inconsistency in our relationship with God and one another.
- B. Since our sin affects not only our relationship with God, but also our relationship with the other members of the Body of Christ, we need to be reconciled with both God and the Body of Christ. This happens in two important ways.
1. First, we are challenged to apologize and reconcile with those whom we've hurt—family members, friends, co-workers, classmates, and even strangers. We do this, not because we hope they do something for us in the future, but rather, because we love them; we see Christ in them; we love Christ in them.
 2. Secondly, as Catholics we are given the opportunity to go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In this Sacrament, the priest represents both Christ and the community of believers, the Church. This can be particularly helpful when the person we have hurt physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually is someone we can no longer personally apologize to, like a deceased relative or stranger. Receiving God's forgiveness and experiencing His peace is just one of the many blessings that come from Reconciliation.
- IV. There are three important blessings that are associated specifically with the *Sacrament* of Reconciliation. They are similar to the blessings found in the medical profession. This is

because in the Sacrament of Reconciliation the priest is called by God to be a spiritual doctor.

- A. Having heard a person's sins, the priest tries to discern the root of the problem. Without a confessor, most people stay on the superficial level of simply asking God for forgiveness for the obvious *symptoms* of sins, not the *root cause* that needs to be healed.
 - B. Next, like a doctor, the priest offers a "prescription;" what we call the penance. This is meant to help the penitent find healing.
 - C. Lastly, the Sacrament of Reconciliation offers people the opportunity to *hear* the words of forgiveness. Like doctors who give their patients reassurance through their words, the priest offers the penitents the opportunity to *audibly hear* Christ's forgiveness. This, in and of itself, can bring tremendous healing.
- V. In closing, let me make a few brief suggestions for how we can experience the Sacrament of Reconciliation in a deeper way.
- A. First, reconciliation requires PRAYERFUL preparation.
 - 1. Most people confess the symptoms of the problem, as opposed to the root causes, which often makes the confession sound more like a laundry list as opposed to a relationship. Prayer, however, can provide us with a deeper look into who we are, who God is, and what our relationship is with Him and other people.
 - 2. These insights open up a whole new level of healing and a whole new experience of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.
 - 3. One good way to prayerfully prepare for reconciliation is to ask God what *He* would like for us to take to Him for forgiveness and healing, and then spend some time listening to what comes to our minds and hearts.
 - B. Another suggestion is to have a consistent confessor. In other words, reconciliation is much more meaningful if we go to the same priest each time.
 - 1. Pride often tempts us to skip around to different priests—confessing behind the screen (and maybe even trying to disguise our voices)—so that he won't know who we are.
 - 2. Ironically, we would never dare think to doing that with our medical physician, so why would we with our spiritual physician?
 - 3. While it is very humbling to go to the same priest—often, of course, with the same sins—it provides God with the opportunity to get at the root of our sin.
 - C. The Act of Contrition is often a frightening thing for people. Even people who have had it memorized for years get into the confessional and forget parts of it. My suggestion is that we make up our own Act of Contrition rather than trying to recite one from memory.
 - 1. The Act of Contrition has two important parts—asking God for forgiveness and asking for His help in the future.

NOTES

2. It can make reconciliation far more meaningful to incorporate these two parts into a prayer spoken from our hearts. The prayer does not have to be elaborate, but simply sincere.
- D. A lot of people ask me how often they should go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. My recommendation is once a month.
 1. Since all venial sins are forgiven through our prayer at Mass, most people do not HAVE to go to Reconciliation once a month, but the practice of examining our hearts and our relationship with God can bear tremendous fruit in our daily journey with God.
 2. In this way, the Sacrament of Reconciliation becomes a tool for growing in our relationship with God as opposed to a tool for simply trying to stay out of hell.
- VI. Each of us lives with the tension of being a sinner who is called by God to grow in a loving relationship with Him who is without sin. We will never completely root out sin from our lives. None of us will die sinlessly perfect. Thankfully, God is fully aware of this and, in fact, sent His Son so that we would be aware of it as well and be at peace with it.
 - A. If sin, which is inevitable, keeps us from growing in our knowledge and love of ourselves, others, and God, and if *loving* is our greatest desire, then reconciliation must be a frequent and important part of our lives.
 - B. We reconcile because of love. We reconcile because the idea that *anything* is standing between us and the ones we love is unbearable to us.

“Whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

—2 Corinthians 5:17--20

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS for WEEK 11

The suggested GRACE to pray for during this week: **TO ACCEPT THAT MY SINS ARE FORGIVEN**

- † “Forgiveness Prayer” by Fr. Robert DeGrandis. Below is the first part of his forgiveness prayer. You might want to spend some time each day thinking about some of the sins that you have struggled to forgive yourself for and pray this prayer:

Lord, Jesus Christ, I ask today to forgive EVERYONE in my life. I know that You will give me the strength to forgive and I thank You that You love me more than I love myself and want my happiness more than I desire it for myself.

Father, I forgive YOU for the times death has come into the family, hard times, financial difficulties, or what I thought were punishments sent by You and people said, “It’s God’s will,” and I became bitter and resentful toward You. Purify my heart and mind today.

Lord, I forgive MYSELF for my sins, faults and failings, for all that is bad in myself or that I think is bad, I forgive myself; and I accept Your forgiveness.

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS for WEEK 12

The suggested GRACE to pray for during this week: **TO BE AN INSTRUMENT OF
GOD'S RECONCILIATION**

- + Matthew 5:9
- + Psalm 122:6-9
- + John 20:21
- + John 4:1-42
- + Prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.



FYI: Below are some of the most popular classics in spirituality
for those of you who are looking for additional reading:

The Cloud of Unknowing, edit by William Johnson.

Confessions, by St. Augustine of Hippo.

Spiritual Exercises, by St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Dark Night of the Soul, by St. John of the Cross.

Interior Castle, by St. Teresa of Avila

The Way of Perfection, by St. Teresa of Avila.

The Spiritual Direction of Saint Claude de la Colombiere, arranged by Mother M. Philip.

Abandonment to Divine Providence, by Jean-Pierre de Caussade.

The Imitation of Christ, by Thomas A' Kempis.

Screwtape Letters, by C.S. Lewis.

WEEK 13:

The Call to Intercession

Dc. Chuck Hankins & Fr. Tom Elliott

Synopsis: All Christians are called to the ministry of intercession, where, inspired by the Holy Spirit and joined with Christ, we bring people's needs before the Father. God's inspiration into intercession can come in many ways, including mentally, emotionally, physically, and through our weaknesses. Intercessory prayer requires us to be prayerful, reverent, humble, faithful, and loving.

Optional Small Group Opening Prayer:

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Jesus, You promised that where two or three are gathered in Your name, You are present in their midst. Be with us now. Teach us how to pray. Give us wisdom, knowledge, understanding, and discernment to know how to prayerfully intercede on behalf of Your people. May Your desire be our desire; Your words be our words; Your love be our love; Your prayer be our prayer. We ask this in Your holy name. Amen.”

Outline of Talk:

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- I. The word intercession literally means to “go between.”
As intercessors, we spiritually stand between those needing prayer and God, lifting their needs up to Him.
- II. Jesus Christ is actually the only intercessor.
 - A. In Paul's first letter to Timothy, chapter two, he encourages Timothy, as well as all of us, to offer, “supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings... for everyone.” He continues, saying, “This is good and pleasing to God our savior, who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth. For there is one God. There is also one mediator between God and the human race, Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:1, 3-5).
 - B. After His Resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven to sit at His Father's right hand and intercede for us. That was His purpose for ascending into heaven—to assume this excellent ministry of intercession. Romans 8:34 testifies to this, saying, “It is Christ (Jesus) who died... [and] was raised, who also is at the right hand of God, [and] who indeed intercedes for us.”
 - C. Jesus' ministry of intercession is accomplished through His union with the Father and the Holy Spirit.
 1. Jesus told His disciples that it was far better for Him to go to the Father and send the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, than for Him to stay on earth with them.
 2. From this heavenly, Resurrected position, Jesus brings our needs before the Father and sends the Holy Spirit to us.
- III. God invites His people to pray for one another. There are hundreds of examples of people praying for one another in the Bible.
 - A. One beautiful story of intercession is in the beginning of Acts chapter three. Peter and John had gone to the temple

area to pray and a crippled man was outside the area begging for alms. When he saw Peter and John has asked them for money. Peter's response was to offer the man prayer instead of money. Peter said, "I have neither silver nor gold, but what I do have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean, (rise and) walk." The man was instantly cured and got up and began jumping around, praising God (Acts 3:1-8).

1. One of the reasons that I love to use this story as an example of intercession is because the crippled man did not truly know what to ask Peter and John for—his request was very limited. Peter discerned a greater intercession than what the man was requesting and he prayed and received it.
 2. There might be people who ask us for specific prayers who don't truly know what they're asking for. They might be asking us to pray for what seems logical (like the money seemed to the crippled man), but God might have a different way for us to pray.
- B. Another beautiful example of intercession is the story of the Israelites in battle with Amalek, found in the Book of Exodus, chapter 17. In this story, Moses stood on the top of a hill with Aaron and Hur, while the battle with Amalek waged below. Verse 11 states that, "As long as Moses kept his hands raised up, Israel had the better of the fight, but when he let his hands rest, Amalek had the better of the fight." Here Moses was prayerfully interceding for God's people as they fought the battle.
1. While Moses was interceding for the Israelites, Aaron and Hur were interceding for Moses. When Moses got tired, he needed Aaron and Hur to physically, as well as spiritually, intercede for him.
 2. Verse 12 describes this, saying, "Moses' hands, however, grew tired; so they put a rock in place for him to sit on. Meanwhile Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side and one on the other, so that his hands remained steady till sunset. And Joshua mowed down Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword" (Exodus 17:10-13).
- C. Throughout the history of salvation, God has allowed His people to participate in His power and love through intercessory prayer. This participation has been brought to a new level through Jesus Christ.
1. As members of the Body of Christ, you and I are invited to be intimately linked with Him in His ministry of intercession. We are only intercessors because Christ, who is Head of the Body, is THE intercessor.
 2. Another way of saying this is—the more intimately we are joined with Christ, the more clearly the Father will hear Christ praying through us.
 3. In the Gospel of John 15:7, Jesus promises, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you." Like branches on a vine, Jesus desires for us to be closely joined to Him.

4. When He says, “ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you,” He is not suggesting that we treat Him like a Divine genie, waiting for Him to grant our every wish, but rather, He is explaining the intimate communication necessary for intercession.
 5. St. Paul explained to the Romans, in chapter 8, “the Spirit... comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings” (Romans 8:26).
- IV. Intercession begins with inspiration. In other words, we have to be attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit if we are going to be involved in intercession.
- A. There are numerous ways that His inspiration can touch our hearts. I want to mention five specific ways.
1. The first and most obvious invitation into intercession comes from a person’s direct request. Each and every one of us have numerous people who ask us for prayer.
 - a. It is our responsibility to always ask God if He desires for us to be an intercessor for that particular person and situation.
 - b. If someone asks for prayer we can immediately pray for them, whether out loud or in silence.
 - c. There are some prayer requests, however, that weigh more heavily on our hearts. There seems to be a deeper call to intercession for these people and situations; and, because of this call, it’s important to ask God HOW He wants us to pray.
 - d. In humility, we must realize that God has many people who can prayerfully intercede, and He is, therefore, not asking us to be in a deep ministry of intercession for everyone who asks us for prayer; just the ones He “burdens” our hearts with.
 2. Sometimes the inspiration into intercession comes through spontaneous thoughts that pop into our heads. For example, we might have someone come to mind, out-of-the-blue; for no apparent reason. In order to know for sure if it is a call into intercession, we must prayerfully discern the movement of God in our hearts, which will be described in the next lesson.
 3. The call into intercession sometimes comes through spontaneous feelings. For example, we might see a stranger in a store and feel ourselves overwhelmed with empathy. Sometimes the feeling that we’re hit with is accompanied by a sudden awareness of how we are to pray. When we see that stranger in the store and we’re filled with empathy, we might have the sudden awareness that their marriage has ended or that they have been suffering abuse.
 - a. It seems that the more confident God is in our willingness to respond to these calls into intercession, as well as be confidential about what He shares with us, the more He begins sharing with us.
 4. Even our bodies can call us into intercession. God can use what we feel in our bodies to invite us to pray for other people.

5. God sometimes uses our past sins and weaknesses as invitations into intercession. These can cover all of the things I mentioned a moment ago—they can involve our bodies, minds, and hearts. Most of the time, the indicator that lets us know that He is calling us into prayer via our sins and weaknesses is that we will suddenly be tempted into a sin that we haven't been tempted by in a long time.
 - a. We never want to just ASSUME that everything is a call into intercession. Sometimes it is a call into a personal healing or it might just be a temptation.
 - b. If we have overcome a sin and yet a spontaneous temptation comes upon us to commit it again, we can and should prayerfully discern whether it has to do with us or if it is a call into intercession.
- B. The Holy Spirit can inspire us to intercede for other people by speaking to our bodies, minds, hearts and even our weaknesses.
 1. At first, this would almost seem to suggest that anything and everything is a call into intercession. Thankfully, God invites us to find a balance from this sort of overzealous thinking through prayerfully and logically discerning the movements of our hearts, which, as I mentioned earlier, we'll hear about in the next lesson.
 2. The qualities, however, that help to make us discerning people are also the qualities that make us effective intercessors. A few of these qualities are:
 - a. Prayerfulness.
 - b. Reverence. (Hebrews 5:7)
 - c. Humility.
 - i. Confidentiality
 - ii. Meekness (Psalm 115:1)
 - d. Faith.
 - e. Love.
- V. The wedding at Cana (John 2:1-10).
 - A. This story is a wonderful example of intercession. Jesus' mother, Mary, was at the wedding with Him and a few of the disciples. When Mary noticed that the wine was about to run out, she interceded and asked Jesus to intervene. With faith, love, humility, and reverence, Mary tells the waiters to "do whatever [Jesus] tells [them]" to do. They follow Jesus' instructions, and Jesus turns the ordinary water into extraordinary wine. The reason this story is such a beautiful example of intercession is because it has several layers of meaning.
 1. First of all, Mary intercedes to Jesus on behalf of the bride and groom. She brought her simple, yet profound, faith and love to Him—much like the water the waiters brought—and He miraculously transformed them.
 2. The waiters are also examples of intercession. Following the prompting they received, they did everything that Jesus told them to do. That is all we are required to do as intercessors—faithfully follow God's inspiration.
 3. And, lastly, Jesus is THE intercessor in this story, as He is in EVERY story.

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS for WEEK 13

The suggested GRACE to pray for during this week: **TO BE AN INTERCESSOR**

† The “Litany of Humility” by Cardinal Merry del Val (1865-1930), Secretary of State to Pope Saint Pius X:

O Jesus, meek and humble of heart, **hear me.**

From the desire of being esteemed,
deliver me, Jesus.

From the desire of being loved,
From the desire of being extolled,
From the desire of being honored,
From the desire of being praised,
From the desire of being preferred to others,
From the desire of being consulted,
From the desire of being approved,

From the fear of being humiliated,
deliver me, Jesus.

From the fear of being despised,
From the fear of suffering rebukes,
From the fear of being calumniated,¹
From the fear of being forgotten,
From the fear of being ridiculed,
From the fear of being wronged,
From the fear of being suspected,

That others may be loved more than I,
Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it.
That others may be esteemed more than I,
That, in the opinion of the world, others
may increase and I may decrease,
That others may be chosen and I set aside,
That others may be praised and I unnoticed,
That others may be preferred to me in everything,
That others may become holier than I, provided
that I become as holy as I should,
Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it.

¹To be falsely accused.

† Of the seven qualities of an intercessor that were mentioned in the talk (prayerfulness, reverence, humility, confidentiality, meekness, faith, and love), which ones are most steadfast in your life and which ones are the weakest? Take some time to share your thoughts on this with God.

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS for WEEK 14

The suggested GRACE to pray for during this week: **TO INTERCEDE**

† Take the newspaper to prayer and intercede for those people/situations that burden your heart the most.

† Litany of Humility. Slowly read through the litany and pay attention to the phrase that seems to “jump out.” Prayerfully intercede for anyone you know (or don’t know) who might be struggling with that particular aspect of life. For example, if the phrase, “From the fear of being despised...” jumped out at you, then intercede for those people who are being or feeling despised.

† *Challenge:* In order to become more aware of the ministry of intercession, write down the ways you felt led to intercede for people throughout the day. You might want to do this before you go to bed each night.

† Exodus 17:10-13

WEEK 15:

Discernment

Mrs. Cindy Shaw

Synopsis: God speaks to all of us in a unique, and often quiet way, that requires us to “discern” His voice. Discernment literally means to sift; to separate and distinguish between things. Like sheep that know their master’s voice, we are invited to intimately know God’s “voice,” by spending time with Him. Competing for our attention are the voices of our human spirits and evil spirits. With practice and God’s grace, we grow in distinguishing all of these “voices,” or spirits, recognizing consolation and desolation. Understanding how these “voices” affect the various parts of who we are helps us to better hear and respond to God’s promptings.

Optional Small Group Opening Prayer:

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Father, our hearts are restless until they rest in You. Please take our restless hearts and quiet them in the stillness of Your Holy Spirit’s peace. We ask that You give us Your grace to yield to all the ways Your Spirit is moving within us. We thank You for where You have brought us thus far, and ask for Your Holy Spirit’s courage to continue on this journey to the center of our heart. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Outline of Talk:

NOTES

- I. One of the most important elements in establishing and nurturing any relationship is communication. It is also essential in order to foster an intimate relationship with God.
 - A. I’m fairly certain that there is not one person here who has never spoken to God. We’ve probably spent a lifetime asking, pleading, thanking and bargaining with Him. So I think it’s safe to say that we talk to God, but do we believe that God talks or communicates with us?
 - B. First of all, we need to realize that God rarely speaks in an audible voice.
 1. Old Testament figures such as Moses, Elijah and the prophets seemed to hear God’s voice and the Gospel writers tell us that God spoke aloud at Jesus’ baptism and death, but usually we “hear” Him in a different manner.
 2. Some of the possible ways that He communicates to us is by subtle leadings and promptings, a type of “inner voice” that comes as a thought or revelation. He also might speak to us through circumstances, especially those that seem very “coincidental” or maybe through something we read in Sacred Scripture.
 3. If we really desire to be in God’s will then it is important for us to discern whether God is the source of our leading or who it is that we are listening to.
- II. The word “discernment” comes from a word that means “to sift;” a Latin term—*discernere*—which means to separate or distinguish between.

- A. In John's Gospel, Jesus tells the story of a shepherd approaching the gate of a sheepfold so that he can enter and claim his flock. He warns of the possibility that thieves and robbers might try to sneak into this fold some other way than by going through the sheep gate and attempt to steal some of the shepherd's sheep.
1. As this story unfolds, Jesus explains that there are many flocks gathered in this sheepfold and many shepherds come into this holding pen to claim their sheep.
 2. You'd think that with all of these different flocks mixed together that it would be a hard, if not impossible, task for a shepherd to identify and claim just his own sheep. But Jesus explains that as the shepherd enters, he begins to call out to his sheep. Well, when the shepherd speaks, the sheep that belong to him immediately hear and recognize his voice. It's then that they fearlessly join and follow their shepherd, going wherever he leads them (John 10:1-15).
- B. It's important to realize that those sheep were able to identify their shepherd's voice because they were accustomed to spending time with him every day.
1. In the past weeks, we've talked about how great an investment of self it takes to establish a relationship with anyone, even with God.
 2. The sheep in a flock spend their entire lives with their shepherd, as they learn not only trust him but also to distinguish or *discern* his voice. They are able to discern their shepherd's voice from other false shepherds that might be attempting to steal them from the fold or to lead them astray.
- C. As Catholics, we believe in a spiritual realm where evil spirits exist and operate to try to mislead and misdirect us in our actions and thoughts. This is somewhat like the potential sheep thief that Jesus warned his disciples about in John's Gospel.
- D. In addition to the voice of evil and God's voice, there is also our human voice. By "human voice" I mean the different movements that affect the way we act and react to various situations, as well as our feelings and attitudes, our history—the way we were raised, our hopes and dreams. Often we hear what we want to hear and then shape that information to fit our already established plans.
1. It is good to sift through all these feelings because some are influenced by God to bring us closer to Him and some are influenced in such a way as to lead us away from Him.
 2. In the discernment process we sift through these three voices, desiring to determine if a prompting or leading is from God, from our own spirit or from the evil spirit.
- E. Each of the voices can be very subtle, it takes practice to determine which spirit we are hearing, and even then we will never be correct all of the time. Discernment allows us to become sensitive to these subtleties as we pay attention to what we experience deep within and begin to listen to the movements of our heart.

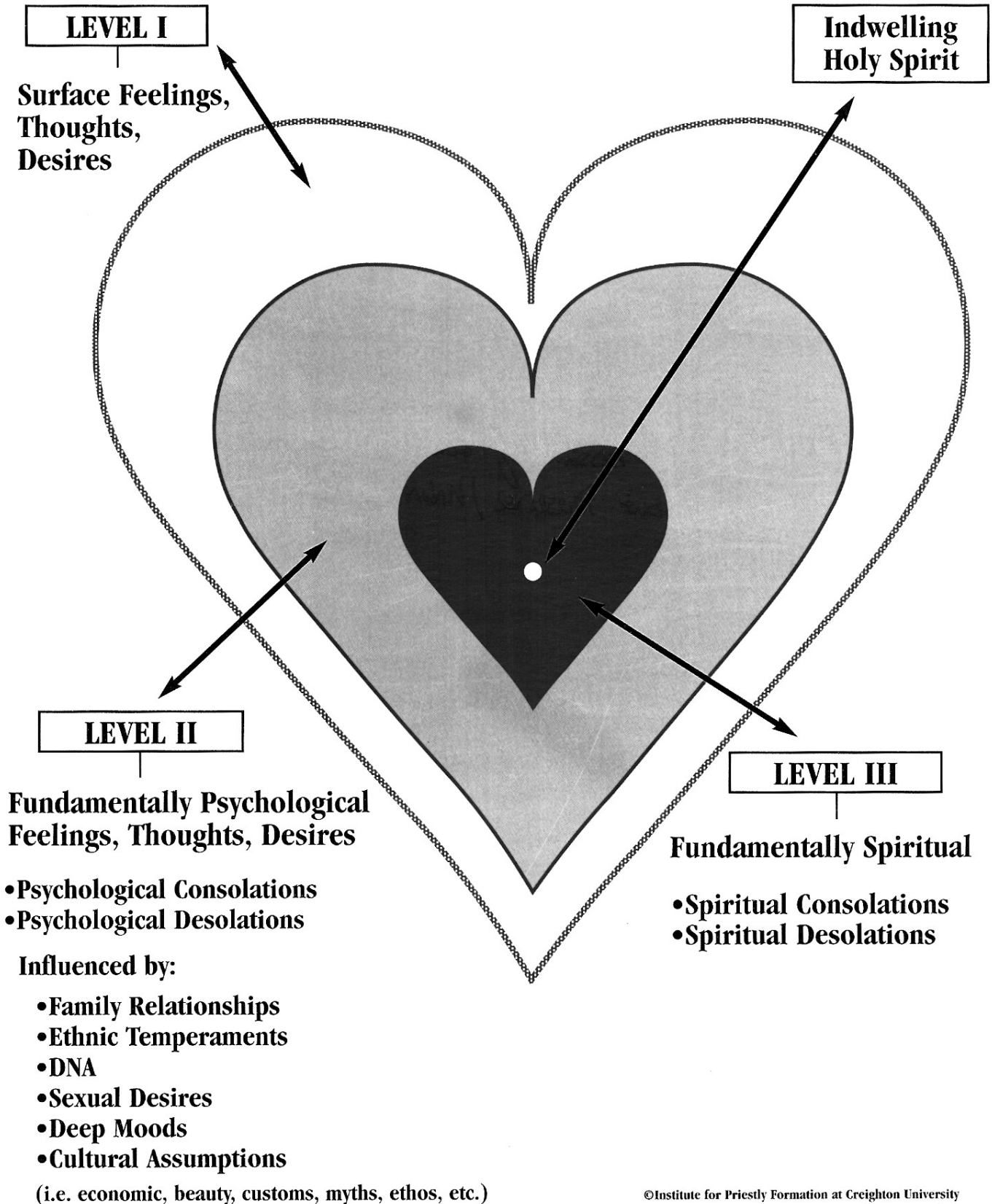
III. Discerning is about listening.

- A. True discernment calls us to be familiar with the Holy Spirit and to be able to hear Him within the movements of our hearts.
- B. St. Ignatius of Loyola spoke a great deal about discerning the movements of the spirits and sensing the Holy Spirit in his *Spiritual Exercises*.
- C. He used the terms “consolation” and “desolation” as he described this shifting or movement in our soul that leads us toward God or away from God.
 - 1. St. Ignatius defined “Spiritual Consolation” as those times when we view everything and everyone in the context of God, the Creator and Giver of all good gifts (316a). When we experience this gift of consolation--- God’s peace and joy, we should give God thanks and remember this gift of consolation for times when we experience desolation.
 - 2. St. Ignatius defined “Spiritual Desolation” as that which leads us away from God (317a). A time of spiritual desolation in our interior life drains us of energy, and our spiritual life begins to seem dry and burdensome. We tend to become self-centered and short-sighted as it becomes hard to pray or to experience God’s presence.
 - a. Instead of the sweetness of consolations, we begin to suffer despair, rebellion, and selfishness and sense a great loss of peace.
 - b. In desolation, we often lose sight of who we really are in Christ. As we all struggle to grow more consistent in our identity in Christ, we repeatedly experience both consolation and desolation.
 - 3. These spiritual movements of consolation and desolation happen in our hearts.
 - a. St Paul in his first letter to the Thessalonians tells us that we are comprised of three parts: body, soul/ mind and spirit (1Thes 5:23).
- D. We oftentimes refer to our heart as the birthplace or cradle of our emotions, especially the emotion of love. Throughout our lives most of us have been taught that God is love and this Love lives in the center of our heart. So it is fitting that we use these heart symbols to demonstrate the interactions between the different dimensions of our being.

(SEE DIAGRAM ON NEXT PAGE)

- 1. The largest and most exterior heart represents our body, our external behavior and surface feelings. It is here that we exhibit our feelings of pain or pleasure, fatigue or energy, frustration or confidence. It is the part of our being where we physically demonstrate the feelings that we are experiencing in any given situation.
- 2. The innermost heart represents where God dwells within us and is often referred to as the core of our soul. It is our center where the Spirit of Christ lives and from where we receive our true identity in Christ. Here is where the indwelling of the Holy Spirit directly communicates with us, the place where we hear God “speak” to us. It is here where we are truly ourselves as

A CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE HEART



seen in the eyes of God. The core of ones' soul is the tabernacle of the Holy Spirit.

3. The middle heart, or our mind, is described as our psyche or the psychological part of our life. Our psyche is where we experience our different moods, both bad and good, family relationships, cultural assumptions about others who are not quite like us. This area is where virtue clashes with sin.

For example, it is here where pride wrestles with humility, anger with gentleness and so forth as the spirits or voices shift and move within us.

4. If we desire to respond to God who is operating in the core of our soul, we must discern what we should do with each of these spirits or movements that we experience.
 - a. As we react to God's voice, the spiritual consolations or virtues are drawn up to our exterior "heart" and surface feelings and reactions, while our sins or vices are drawn down into our souls' core so they can be transformed.
 - b. According to St. Ignatius, when we respond to these movements within us, Spiritual Consolations are acted upon and we allow our Spiritual Desolations to be drawn down into our core in order to be transformed.

IV. As we allow our hearts the freedom to listen and discern and "try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord," we will begin to grow into a deeper knowledge of who we really are in Him and begin to actually live the life He calls us to.

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS for WEEK 15

The suggested GRACE to pray for during this week: **TO KNOW WHAT PLEASES GOD**

- † Read Ephesians 5:10 and ask the question, "God, what about me gives You pleasure?"
- † Read Hebrews 13:20-21 and write a letter to God in your prayer journal about what came to your heart and mind while you were reading.

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS for WEEK 16

The suggested GRACE to pray for during this week: **TO LISTEN**

CONSCIOUSNESS EXAMEN is a spiritual exercise where we take time throughout the day to reflect on where God has been and what He has been doing. Unlike an "examination of *conscience*," the Examen is at the heart of discernment as it brings into God's Light the ways in which our hearts are either congruent or incongruent with Christ's heart. This is precisely why it is the examination of *consciousness* rather than simply *conscience*. The focus is not on sin, but on the "discernment of spirits" that Ignatius deemed essential for authentic Christianity. Saint Ignatius of Loyola lays out the five steps of the examen in #43 of his Spiritual Exercises. Here they are in a simplified form:

1. Prayer for Light: Begin by relaxing into God's presence. Ask God to *illumine* your heart so that you can know yourself as the Holy Spirit knows you. **2. Thanksgiving:** Spend a minute thanking God for very specific gifts you've received so far today, remembering poverty. **3. Survey of Actions:** Look over the experiences of the day (since the last examen), focusing on the feelings that surfaced. Choose *one* experience that seems the most significant (either in a positive or negative way). Ask God these questions: "What are You saying thru the feelings of this event?" "God, how did I fail to hear You in those feelings?" "How are You calling me to *conversion* thru this?" **4. Contrition:** Ask for forgiveness for any failure to reverence the presence of God. **5. Response:** What hope-filled desire do I offer to God based on what He has just revealed to me?

WEEK 17:

Living in the Spirit

Fr. Tom Elliott

Synopsis: The Holy Spirit teaches and empowers us. Living in the Holy Spirit gives birth to the fruits and gifts of the Spirit. The early Christians understood the Holy Spirit in a very experiential way, as opposed to theologically. The gifts of tongues and prophecy, as well as all of the Spirit's gifts, were an everyday part of their Christian faith. These gifts are alive in the Church today and are an important part of our Christian journey.

Optional Small Group Opening Prayer:

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Come Holy Spirit. Rest upon us and within us. We pray for a fresh outpouring of Your Spirit. Come Holy Spirit. Fill our hearts and enkindle within us the fire of Your love. Come Holy Spirit. Renew us—our hearts, our lives, our families, our churches and communities; You renew the face of the earth. Come Holy Spirit, come. Amen.”

Outline of Talk:

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- I. Today, we are going to look at the Holy Spirit—the Third Person of the Trinity, and for many people, the most mysterious and nebulous Person of the Trinity.
 - A. For the next twenty minutes, we're going to explore different aspects of who the Holy Spirit is and what He does, especially as we're told through Sacred Scripture.
 - B. We'll root our entire understanding of the Third Person of the Trinity in the Biblical premise that it is *impossible* to be authentically Christian without being inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit.
 - C. This is seen very clearly in two important Scripture passages.
 1. The first is Jesus' farewell to His disciples in the Gospel of John. In chapter 14, Jesus says to them, “The Advocate, the holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name—he will teach you everything and remind you of all that [I] told you” (John 14:26). Two chapters later Jesus says, “It is better for you that I go. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7).
 2. The Holy Spirit allows the teaching of Jesus to become rooted in our hearts. The Holy Spirit explains Christ's teaching to us in a way that speaks to our souls as much as it speaks to our minds. He is the bearer of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. He's our teacher.
 3. The Holy Spirit's presence is SO important that Jesus instructs His disciples in Luke chapter 24 (vs. 49) not to do ANYTHING until they have been clothed in the Holy Spirit.
 4. In addition to inspiring and teaching us, the Holy Spirit empowers us. His empowerment stands in stark contrast to the “power” of self-indulgence.

- II. According to St. Paul, living in the Spirit gives birth to what are commonly called the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.
- A. In some New Testament transcripts, three more gifts are included—long-suffering, modesty, and chastity.
- B. But what does Paul mean by “living in the Spirit”? Living in the Spirit is not a light switch. It is not on or off. There are degrees of living in the Spirit.
1. For example, through the creation stories in the Book of Genesis, we see that God’s life has been breathed into us simply through our being conceived in our mother’s womb. This is an act of the Holy Spirit that we mention in the Nicene Creed every Sunday at Mass—“We believe in the Holy Spirit, the giver of life...” In this way, even those who are not Christian are living in the Spirit to the degree that they have a pulse.
 2. However, through Baptism, we grow deeper in the Holy Spirit; then, through the Sacrament of Confirmation, the Holy Spirit is sealed within us and makes us all-the-more attentive to His leadings.
 3. Generally, through the Sacrament of Confirmation we become more aware of the seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit—wisdom, knowledge, understanding, right judgment, courage, reverence, and wonder and awe.
 4. If we look more closely at these gifts it is obvious how they are, ultimately, manifestations of our LISTENING TO and DISCERNING the Holy Spirit in a deeper way. For example:
 - a. Wisdom is the ability to see things as they truly are in an open-minded manner.
 - b. Knowledge is the ability to comprehend the truths of the universe.
 - c. Understanding is the sensitivity needed to accept, care, listen, understand, and forgive.
 - d. Right Judgment (or Counsel) is the ability to make good and wise decisions.
 - e. Courage (or Fortitude) is the strength to do what is right in spite of challenges.
 - f. Reverence (or Piety) is a deep respect for God, for others, and for all of creation.
 - g. Wonder and Awe (or Fear of the Lord) is a sense of the greatness and majesty of God coupled with a deep realization of God’s nearness.
- III. While the 1st century Christians would have been well aware of the fruits and gifts I just mentioned, their understanding of the Holy Spirit was far less theological and far more experiential.
- A. A 1st century Christian could not have explained who the three persons of the Trinity are and what their relationship to one another is; that understanding developed over the course of the first few centuries of the church’s history. However, beginning with Pentecost, they experienced powerful manifestations of the Holy Spirit, that St. Paul also refers to as “gifts.” We read about these in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter two:

When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem. At this sound, they gathered in a large crowd, but they were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language. --Acts 2:1-6

- B. The gift of tongues is just one gift attributed to the Holy Spirit that St. Paul mentions in his letters. In addition to being the most common gift of the Holy Spirit, it also seems to be the most misunderstood.
1. Many people read Acts chapter two and assume that the gift of tongues meant that the disciples were speaking in different languages despite the fact that they had never learned those languages. More than likely, just the opposite was true—the disciples were speaking in what sounded a lot like gibberish, while the crowds were hearing the disciples in their own language.
 2. This understanding of the gift of tongues seems much more congruent with descriptions found throughout Paul's letters, as well as our experience of the gift today.
 3. The gift of tongues must have been a very prevalent gift, because St. Paul devotes more than an entire chapter to it in his first letter to the Corinthians. In chapter 14 of that letter, he makes several points about the gift of tongues:
 - a. The gift of prophecy is a higher gift than tongues, since a prophetic message can build other people up. (1 Cor 14:1)
 - b. Those who speak in tongues build only themselves up, unless there is someone present who has the gift of interpretation of tongues. (1 Cor. 14:3-4)
 - c. Those who speak in tongues should pray for the gift of interpretation. (1 Cor. 14:13)
 - d. Praying in tongues is a prayer from the inner spirit, not from the mind. (1 Cor. 14:14)
 - e. Praying in tongues in an assembly of people should rarely happen, unless there is a person to interpret. (1 Cor. 14:19, 26-28)
 - f. Speaking in tongues should not be forbidden during assembly of the faithful, but should be done properly and in order. (1 Cor. 14:39-40)
 4. In addition to the gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy, St. Paul mentions several other gifts of the Spirit in chapter 12 of his first letter to the Corinthians.
- IV. All of these gifts are alive and well in the Church today. Unfortunately, many Christians think that these gifts are used only in Pentecostal churches or in charismatic prayer groups. Many Christians are even skeptical about such bold

manifestations of the Spirit. Yet, they have been a common and important part of Christianity from the very beginning.

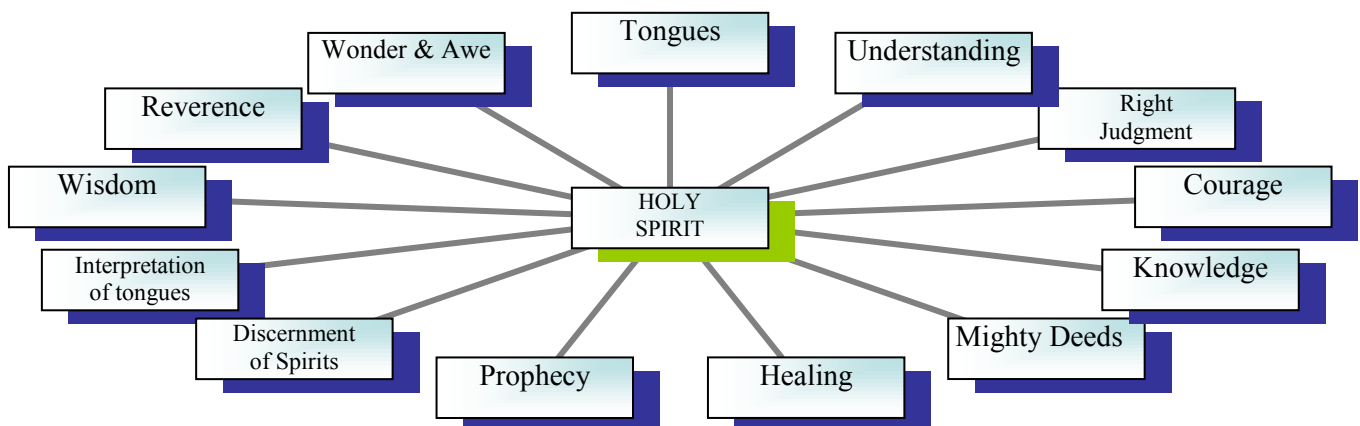
- A. Through the spiritual awakening that is happening right now around the world, as well as the radical challenge of living the faith in the face of radical evil, people are beginning to see that the question is not “Are you charismatic?” or “Are you contemplative?” No, the challenge of living our faith is so great that it requires us to be both Spirit-filled and prayerfully contemplative.
 - B. The Spirit-filled experience of our faith that has been awakened in the world today is simply a return to the vitality of faith that the early Christians experienced and preached. It is “living in the Spirit.” And, the gifts of the Spirit will help us in that growth, which, in turn, will reveal the fruits of the Spirit.
- V. Begin asking God which of the gifts of the Holy Spirit He desires for you right now in your life. While all of the gifts are *present* in the presence of the Holy Spirit, different gifts are *operative* within us at different times depending on what we need at the moment.
- A. What gifts does God know you and I need right now? Let’s pray for those gifts, that our desire will truly be God’s desire.
 - B. I’m going to close with a brief reading from Acts chapter 1, beginning with verse three.

[Jesus] presented himself alive to [the disciples] by many proofs after he had suffered, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While meeting with them, he enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for “the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak; for John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the holy Spirit.” When they had gathered together they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He answered them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. But you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS for WEEK 17

The suggested GRACE to pray for during this week: **TO TRUST THE HOLY SPIRIT**

- † What gift(s) of the Holy Spirit do you desire right now in your life?
- † Ask God which gifts HE desires for you and spend some time listening in prayer.



WEEK 18:

Pray as You Can

Mr. Tom Jakobs

Synopsis: While there are numerous styles of prayer, each style is merely a tool for being available to God. Occasionally, we face the temptation to try to compare our prayer to the prayer of others. We cannot judge the “success” of our prayer by anything other than our faithfulness to our prayer time and the fruit of our prayer—namely loving others. Identifying pride and control in our prayer, as well as the urge to judge the success of our prayer, can help us to stay focused on praying as we can rather than as we cannot.

Optional Small Group Opening Prayer:

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Thank You, God, for loving each of us uniquely. Your particular love shapes each of us into unique, particular images of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to be open to how You want to love us, how You want to communicate with us, and how You want us to reflect the light of Your Son’s love. Give us the courage to pray as we can, never judging our prayer by how other’s pray, but simply by our openness to Your love. We ask this through Your Son, Jesus Christ, Who is Lord, for ever and ever. Amen.”

Outline of Talk:

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- I. During this program, we have introduced you to several prayer styles. For some of you, journaling has been a great prayer tool. Some of you probably hate journaling! We have also briefly introduced the idea of using scripture as a meditation tool, and using a mantra to quiet the mind during prayer. As you continue on your spiritual journey, you will undoubtedly come upon other prayer techniques. Some of them will seem consistent with your experience during this program, some will seem strange. You will come across people that will give you the impression that if you are not using a mantra, or journaling, or including scripture in your prayer, or some other technique, that your prayer life is somehow incomplete or immature. There are few hard-and-fast rules when it comes to prayer, but I think the following is one such rule: Pray as you can.

This wisdom is attributed to Abbot John Chapman, but it comes up often in the teachings of other masters of prayer as well. As seems to be the case often, the rule is stated so simply, yet it is difficult to live out. So what does “Pray as you can” really mean?

- A. As we move closer to God in prayer, our desire to pray well often increases. There are days when we pray and God seems so close that his presence overwhelms us. We leave prayer supercharged! There is no doubt in our minds that God exists and that he loves us. We feel affirmed in our faith and prayer. These are wonderful times to be cherished.
- B. But it usually doesn’t take too long before we start to have days when we enter prayer and can’t seem to find God. We sit there feeling like a lost child, not sure what has happened. Has God abandoned us? Are we doing something wrong?

- C. These times are difficult. We long to feel God's presence. Of course, God is still there – we're just being stretched and formed by him. But as God does this, we feel uncertain. What should we do? Pray as we can!
 - D. The different techniques for praying have, or should have, only one goal – to help pray-ers pray. If journaling helps you to be present to God, then by all means journal! If reading Scripture quiets your mind and helps you to be present to God, then read on! God does not care what technique you use to pray. If your intention is to pray and your chosen technique leads you to be quiet before God, then God will figure out how to meet you in that prayer. So pick a prayer style that feels true to you, that helps you to show up for prayer. This is praying as you can.
- II. There are some obstacles to 'praying as you can' that I'd like to point out. These obstacles present themselves in many ways – and I bet you have experienced some of them. These obstacles get their power from going undetected – they operate in the darkness of our minds and souls. Because they move us away from God, I will call them evil. There is nothing unusual about evil. We experience it all the time. But when we shed light on the evil, it loses its power. Evil often hides behind a feeling or desire that in-and-of-itself is not bad. Let's expose a few little devils that interfere with us praying as we can.
- A. In our effort to pray well, we somewhat naturally look around to see how other pray-ers are doing. And why wouldn't we? How else can we measure our progress? If we think we are doing well, we have a sense of pride, which of course we try to hide, because everyone knows pride is not good! But then we meet someone who seems more prayerful than us. They talk about different prayer techniques that seem to be producing spectacular results. Well, maybe we should look into these techniques. I mean, there is nothing wrong with it – I am trying to improve my prayer life. Surely, this is something that God wants!
 - B. Now, given that I started this story by talking about evil, some of you are likely suspicious. And you should be. But before we get to the problem, please sit a moment with the logic of my story. We're looking around trying to see how we're doing. We're measuring our progress. We want to be good. The problem here is that our concern is all self-centered. God is not part of the story. We didn't have a sense of God asking us to do something different – we were trying to measure our progress and compare results. The little devils are pride and control. Instead of chasing after success, we should be praying as we can. We should be seeking God by sitting quietly with God, not by chasing after what we think is success.
 - C. Now I'll pick on those of us who don't think our prayer is going so well! We're not prideful, because we are not making much progress. We know we should pray more or better, but our lives are so busy. Trying to find 20 minutes alone is impossible on most days. We're not bad people. And besides that, the holy-rollers aren't so holy either. Their sins are obvious to us. On the whole, we think we're doing ok.

- D. Now try not to get stuck in the specifics of this story. The point is – it is all about me again! It’s actually the same little devils of pride and control. “I’m not so bad.” “I just don’t have time.” God isn’t asking us to be good. God is asking us to be in a loving relationship. God didn’t say that we had to pray a certain way; God just asks that we show up. If we can only squeeze in 10 minutes before picking up the kids, then give God 10 minutes. Here again, pray as we can.
 - E. My prayer experience suggests that pride and control are persistent and clever little devils. They are constantly trying to tell me that I could be better. They hide in my desire to be good. But they are dangerous because they move my focus from God to me. It is a constant struggle to watch out for these guys.
 - F. I have found these same warnings in the writings of Fr. Thomas Green and Abbot Chapman. Once you have found a prayer style that helps you to show up in prayer, stick to it. Only consider changing when you feel that God is leading you elsewhere. There are two measuring sticks that can be helpful as you try to discern whether God is asking you to change prayer styles. The first is your consistency of showing up for prayer. The second is watching for the fruits of prayer.
 - G. Remember that prayer techniques are just tools. As we continue to pray, it may be that the tools we use will shift as God works on us. It is also likely as time goes on that we’ll struggle to listen closely to God. As we struggle to listen, we will become less sure of ourselves. We won’t know for sure that we’re praying well. While this is uncomfortable, it is a sign of growing faith. When prayer feels good, it is easy – right? A person with a growing faith shows up for prayer even when it doesn’t feel good. As long as you are showing up, you are right where God wants you to be. You are praying as you can!
- III. As our prayer becomes more difficult, we have to look carefully for the fruits of prayer. Here again, when prayer feels good, the fruit is pretty obvious. But when prayer is more difficult, when we can’t feel God in prayer, how do we know that we are not lost?
- A. Fr. Thomas Green gives us valuable advice in his book *When the Well Runs Dry*. First, check the obvious. Have we picked up a new favorite sin, or become reacquainted with an old one? If so, this is likely to be the culprit. But if we haven’t picked up a new sin, and we are sincere in our desire to pray, it is likely that God is calling us to a deeper faith. We need to keep praying as we can, and we need to watch carefully for the fruits of our prayer outside of prayer.
 - B. Abbot Jerome Kodell in his booklet *12 Keys to Prayer* tells us that the fruit of prayer is how we treat others. If prayer is dry, but we occasionally notice that we respond better to the people around us, then we should use this as a sign that our prayer is fine – even if it doesn’t feel that way. We should keep praying as we can.

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- C. On the other hand, if we have been faithful pray-ers, and over a period of a few weeks, we find that our faithfulness to prayer is waning, then we need to take a step back and assess why. Why has our prayer become inconsistent? It could be that we just need to “get back into the habit” of prayer. In this case, we need to isolate the obstacles to prayer and find a way to pray as we can. The all-important focus needs to be on showing-up for prayer, of making a willful effort, even if we’re not happy with the circumstances surrounding our prayer time. As long as we are trying to be at prayer with God, God will figure out how to reach us.
- D. The other choice is that during prayer God is leading us to a place that we’re not-to-sure we want to go. This place can be hard for us on several fronts. It can be that God is moving us to a new, truer image of himself – or even ourselves. For example, maybe our whole life we have viewed God as a strong parent-figure. And maybe God is moving us to a less well defined image of God. This can make us feel that everything is falling apart. That our once strong faith is now weak—we don’t even know who God is! Times like these are difficult. And if we desire to be people of faith, all we can do is humbly show up for pray and ask God to help us. Notice also, that the control devil lurks here as well. It takes great faith to follow God beyond where we think he will lead us. The trick is to hang in there, and pray as we can.

Use the chart below as a tool for prayerfully reflecting on where God has been throughout your spiritual journey during the last 18 weeks.

A. Chronology of my life	B. What were the most important relationships during this time?	C. What was I most thankful for during this period in my life?	D. What were my greatest emotional struggles during formation?	E. What were my desires during this formation program?
During these weeks of Spiritual formation				
	F. What have I learned about myself during this formation program?	G. What new insights have I gained from God during this program?	H. How has my image of God changed throughout this spiritual journey?	I. How have I experienced God’s forgiveness during the past 17 weeks?