

JOURNEY OF THE HEART



LENTEN REFLECTION AND PRAYER WITH
HENRI J.M. NOUWEN

INTRODUCTION

Fr. Henri Nouwen (1932-1996) was one of the most popular and down-to-earth spiritual writers of the twentieth century. His many books chart a path for us to follow on our journey into deeper communion with God and Jesus through the Holy Spirit. As Nouwen himself reminds us:

The spiritual life has to do with the heart of existence. I find the word “heart” a good word. I don’t mean by it the seat of our feelings as opposed to the seat of our thoughts. By “heart” I mean the center of our being, the place where we are most ourselves, where we are most human. In that sense the heart is the focus of the spiritual life. It has become clearer to me than ever that my personal relationship with Jesus is the heart of my existence.

I intend to start from my conviction that Jesus is the heart of my existence and, on that basis, to take a broad look at the world we live in. In doing so these reflections can also help intensify your experience of being a Christian and so prepare you for the Feast of the Resurrection which we shall be celebrating in forty days time, when Easter comes.

This little booklet of daily reflections invites us to pause in our hectic activity, quiet our hearts, take some time to attend to the divine presence in us and around us, and then speak to God from the depths of our heart about what really matters most to us.

—Steve Mueller, Editor

BE WITH ME, LORD

“Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing.”
(Joel 2:12)

Jesus, the Lenten season begins. It is a time to be with you in a special way, a time to pray, to fast, and thus to follow you on your way to Jerusalem, to Golgotha, and to the final victory over death.



I am still so divided. I truly want to follow you, but I also want to follow my own desires and lend an ear to the voices that speak about prestige, success, human respect, pleasure, power, and influence. Help me to become deaf to these voices and more attentive to your voice, which calls me to choose the narrow road to life.

I know that Lent is going to be a very hard time for me. The choice for your way has to be made every moment of my life. I have to choose thoughts that are your thoughts, words that are your words, and actions that are your actions. There are no times or places without choices. And I know how deeply I resist choosing you.

Please, Lord, be with me at every moment and in every place.

Jesus, give me the strength and the courage to live this season faithfully so that...

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

RETURNING TO GOD

“I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord and they shall return to me with their whole heart.” (Jeremiah 24:7)

I am certainly not ready for Lent yet. Christmas seems just behind us, and Lent seems an unwelcome guest. I could have used a few more weeks to get ready for this season of repentance, prayer, and preparation for the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus stressed the hidden life. Whether we give alms, pray, or fast, we are to do it in a hidden way, not to be praised by people but to enter into closer communion with God. Lent is a time of returning to God. It is a

time to confess how we keep looking for joy, peace, and satisfaction in the many people and things surrounding us, without really finding what we desire. Only God can give us what we want. So we must be reconciled with God, as Paul says, and let that reconciliation be the basis of our relationships with others. Lent is a time of refocusing, of reentering the place of truth, of reclaiming our true identity.

O God, help me to return to you this Lent. Today I will...

Friday after Ash Wednesday

PRAY EVEN THOUGH IT'S HARD

“Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.”
(Matthew 26:41)

Is this going to be a period of purification, Lord? Is this going to be the time when you give me insight into the chains that bind me and the courage to throw them off? Is this going to be my chance to see my prison and escape it?

You said, “Pray even when you do not feel attracted to it.” Yes, Lord, I will try to pray, even when I am afraid to face you and myself, even when I keep falling asleep or feel as though I am going around in circles, even when it seems that nothing is happening.

Yes, Lord, I will pray—not only with others, not only supported by the rhythms of the choir, but also alone with you. I will try not to be afraid. Lord, give me courage and strength.

Jesus, let me see myself in the light of your loving mercy. Today I will...

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

DO NOT FEAR

“Do not be afraid, for I am with you and will bless you.” (Genesis 26:24)

There is so much fear in us. Fear of people, fear of God and much raw, undefined, free-floating anxiety. I wonder if fear is not our main obstacle to prayer. When we enter into the presence of God and start to sense that huge reservoir of fear in us, we want to run away into the many distractions which our busy world offers us so abundantly.

But we should not be afraid of our fears. We can confront them, give words to them and lead them into the presence of him who says: “Do not be afraid, it is I.” Our inclination is to show our Lord only what we feel comfortable with. But the more we dare to reveal our whole trembling self to him, the more we will be able to sense that his love, which is perfect love, casts out all our fears.

Jesus, help me to face my fears and be with you. Today I will...

First Sunday of Lent

FACING TEMPTATIONS

“You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:11)

His temptation reveals the true identity of Jesus. Jesus is the Beloved of God. This spiritual truth will guide all his thoughts, words, and actions. It is the rock on which his compassionate ministry will be built. The “Tempter” came to him asking him to prove that he was worth being loved. The “Tempter” said to him: “Do something useful, like turning stones into bread. Do something sensational, like throwing yourself down from a high tower. Do something that brings you power, like paying me homage.”

These three temptations were three ways to seduce Jesus into becoming a competitor for love. The world of the “Tempter” is precisely that world in which people compete for love through doing useful, sensational, and powerful things and so winning medals that gain them affection and admiration.

Jesus, however, is very clear in his response: “I don’t have to prove that I am worthy of love. I am the Beloved of God, the One on whom God’s favor rests.” It was that victory over the “Tempter” that set Jesus free to choose for the compassionate life.

O God, help me know that I am your beloved child. Today I will...



PRAYER IS HARD

“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?”
(Psalm 42:5)

If I desire anything, it is the healing calm of God’s forgiveness. The longer I live, the more I am aware of my sinfulness, faithlessness, lack of courage, narrow-mindedness; the more I feel the surging waves of greed, lust, violence, and indignation roaring in my innermost self. Growing older has not made life with God easier. In fact, it has become harder to experience God’s presence, to feel God’s love, to taste God’s goodness, to touch God’s caring hands. Oh, how much do I pray that God will let me know through all my senses that God’s love is more real than my sins and my cowardice, how much do I want to see the light in darkness, and how much do I wait for the day that God will order the surging waves to calm down, and how much do I wait to hear God’s voice, which says: “Why are you afraid, man of little faith? I am with you always.”

Jesus, you know my sinfulness and desire for you. Today help me to...

REACH OUT TO GOD

“Show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight.”
(Exodus 33:13)

Prayer is often considered a weakness, a support system, which is used when we can no longer help ourselves. But this is only true when the God of our prayers is created in our own image and adapted to our own needs and concerns. When, however, prayer makes us reach out to God, not on our own but on his terms, then prayer pulls us away from self-preoccupations, encourages us to leave familiar ground, and challenges us to enter into a new world which cannot be contained within the narrow boundaries of our mind or heart. Prayer, therefore, is a great adventure because the God with whom we enter into a new relationship is greater than we are and defies all our calculations and predictions. The movement from illusion to prayer is hard to make since it leads us from false certainties to true uncertainties, from an easy support system to a

risky surrender, and from the many “safe” gods to the God whose love has no limits.

Jesus, help me reach out to you in prayer, so that...

Wednesday, Week 1

PRAYING IN THE SPIRIT OF JESUS

“The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.” (Job 33:4)

In Jesus, God became one of us to lead us through Jesus into the intimacy of his divine life. Jesus came to us to become as we are and left us to allow us to become as he is. By giving us his Spirit, his breath, he became closer to us than we are to ourselves. It is through this breath of God that we can call God “Abba, Father” and can become part of the mysterious divine relationship between Father and Son. Praying in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, therefore, means participating in the intimate life of God himself.

There is probably no image that expresses so well the intimacy with God in prayer as the image of God’s breath. We are like asthmatic people who are cured of their anxiety. The Spirit has taken away our narrowness (the Latin word for anxiety is *angustia* = narrowness) and made everything new for us. We receive a new breath, a new freedom, a new life. This new life is the divine life of God himself. Prayer, therefore, is God’s breathing in us, by which we become part of the intimacy of God’s inner life, and by which we are born anew.



Jesus, breathe in me and share your life so that today...

Thursday, Week 1

MY OWN WAY TO PRAY

“The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”

(Romans 8:26)

Just as there are many ways to be hospitable, there are many ways to pray. When we are serious about prayer and no longer consider it one

of the many things people do in their life but, rather, the basic receptive attitude out of which all of life can receive new vitality, we will, sooner or later, raise the question: “What is my way to pray, what is the prayer of my heart?”

Just as artists search for the style that is most their own, so people who pray search for the prayer of their heart. What is most profound in life, and therefore most dear to us, always needs to be properly protected as well as expressed. It, therefore, is not surprising that prayer is often surrounded by carefully prescribed gestures and words, by detailed rituals and elaborate ceremonies.

Jesus, teach me to let your Spirit pray in me. Today I will...

Friday, Week 1

EMBRACING MY DISTRACTIONS

“Attend to me, and answer me; I am troubled in my complaint. I am distraught by the noise of the enemy, because of the clamor of the wicked.”

(Psalm 55:2-3)

Why, O Lord, is it so hard for me to keep my heart directed toward you? Why do the many little things I want to do, and the many people I know, keep crowding my mind, even during the hours that I am totally free to be with you and you alone? Why does my mind wander off in so many directions, and why does my heart desire the things that lead me astray? Are you not enough for me? Do I keep doubting your love and care, your mercy and grace? Do I keep wondering, in the center of my being, whether you will give me all I need if I just keep my eyes on you?

Please accept my distractions, my fatigue, my irritations, and my faithless wanderings. You know me more deeply and fully than I know myself. You love me with a greater love than I can love myself. You even offer me more than I can desire. Look at me, see me in all my misery and inner confusion, and let me sense your presence in the midst of my turmoil.

Jesus, help me keep my heart directed toward you. Today I will...

MEETING JESUS IN OUR HEART

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”
(Luke 10:27)

The mystery of the spiritual life is that Jesus desires to meet us in the seclusion of our own heart, to make his love known to us there, to free us from our fears and to make our own deepest self known to us. In the privacy of our heart, therefore, we can learn not only to know Jesus but, through Jesus, ourselves as well.

Each time you let the love of God penetrate deeper into your heart, you lose a bit of your anxiety, and every time you shed a bit of your anxiety, you learn to know yourself better and long all the more to be known by your loving God.

Thus, the more you learn to love God, the more you learn to know and to cherish yourself. Self-knowledge and self-love are the fruit of knowing and loving God.

Laying our hearts totally open to God leads to a love of ourselves that enables us to give whole-hearted love to our fellow human beings. In the seclusion of our hearts we learn to know the hidden presence of God; and with that spiritual knowledge we can lead a loving life.

Jesus, I open my heart to find your presence within me. Today I will...



Second Sunday of Lent

SILENCING MY HEART

“Be still, and know that I am God!” (Psalm 46:10)

Jesus, it is so hard to be silent, silent with my mouth, but even more, silent with my heart. There is so much talking going on within me. It seems that I am always involved in inner debates with myself, my friends, my enemies, my supporters, my opponents, my colleagues, and my rivals. But this inner debate reveals how far my heart is from you. If I were simply to rest at your feet and realize that I belong to you and you alone, I would easily stop arguing with all the real and imagined people

around me. These arguments show my insecurity, my fear, my apprehensions, and my need for being recognized and receiving attention. You, O Lord, will give me all the attention I need if I would simply stop talking and start listening to you.

Jesus, help me listen for your voice in my heart so that today...

Monday, Week 2

PRAY WITH OPEN HANDS

“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.” (1 Corinthians 10:31)

A life in prayer is a life with open hands where you are not ashamed of your weakness but realize that it is more perfect for a man to be led by the other than to seek to hold everything in his own hands.

Only within this kind of life does a spoken prayer make sense. A prayer in church, at table or in school is only a witness to what we want to make of our entire lives. Such a prayer only recalls to mind that praying is living and it invites you to make this an ever-greater reality. Thus there are as many ways to pray as there are moments in life. Sometimes you seek out a quiet spot and you want to be alone, sometimes you look for a friend and you want to be together. Sometimes you'd like a book or some music. Sometimes you want to sing out with hundreds, sometimes only to whisper with a few. Sometimes you want to say it with words, sometimes with a deep silence.

In all these moments, you gradually make your life more a prayer and you open your hands to be led by God even to where you would rather not go.

Jesus, help me make each moment today a prayer so that...

Tuesday, Week 2

HEAR AND OBEY

“Listen to my voice, and do all that I command you. So shall you be my people, and I will be your God.” (Jeremiah 11:4)

We are usually surrounded by so much inner and outer noise that it is

hard to truly hear our God when He is speaking to us. We have often become deaf, unable to know when God calls us and unable to understand in which direction He calls us. Thus our lives have become absurd. In the word *absurd* we find the Latin word *surdus*, which means “deaf.”

A spiritual life requires discipline because we need to learn to listen to God, who constantly speaks but whom we seldom hear. When, however, we learn to listen, our lives become obedient lives. The word *obedient* comes from the Latin word *audire*, which means “listening.”

A spiritual discipline is necessary in order to move slowly from an absurd to an obedient life, from a life filled with noisy worries to a life in which there is some free inner space where we can listen to our God and follow His guidance.

Jesus, open my ears and heart to hear your call so that today I will...

Wednesday, Week 2

ALL EARS FOR GOD

“Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.” (Psalm 78:1)

Jesus’ life was a life of obedience. He was always listening to the Father, always attentive to His voice, always alert for His directions. Jesus was “all ears.” That is true prayer: being all ears for God. The core of all prayer is indeed listening, obediently standing in the presence of God. A spiritual discipline, therefore, is the concentrated effort to create some inner and outer space in our lives, where this obedience can be practiced. Through a spiritual discipline we prevent the world from filling our lives to such an extent that there is no place left to listen. A spiritual discipline sets us free to pray or, to say it better, allows the Spirit of God to pray in us.

There are two important disciplines through which we can “set our hearts on the kingdom.” They can be considered as disciplines of prayer. They are the discipline of solitude and the discipline of community.

Jesus, open my ears to listen for your voice today so that...

WE ARE GOD'S CHILDREN

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.” (1 John 3:1)

Your true identity is as a child of God. This is the identity you have to accept. Once you have claimed it and settled in it, you can live in a world that gives you much joy as well as pain. You can receive the praise as well as the blame that comes to you as an opportunity for strengthening your basic identity, because the identity that makes you free is anchored beyond all human praise and blame. You belong to God, and it is as a child of God that you are sent into the world.

You need spiritual guidance; you need people who can keep you anchored in your true identity. The temptation to disconnect from that deep place in you where God dwells and to let yourself be drowned in the praise or blame of the world always remains.

O God, help me know how to be your child. Today I will...

BECOMING GOD'S BELOVED

“Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you.”
(Psalm 33:22)

If the spiritual life is not simply a way of being, but also a way of becoming, what then is the nature of this becoming?

Becoming the Beloved means letting the truth of our Belovedness become enfleshed in everything we think, say, or do. It entails a long and painful process of appropriation. As long as “being the Beloved” is little more than a beautiful thought that hangs above my life to keep me from becoming depressed, nothing really changes. What is required is to become the Beloved in the commonplaces of my daily existence and, bit by bit, to close the gap that exists between what I know myself to be and the specific realities of everyday life. Becoming the Beloved is pulling the truth revealed to me from above down into the ordinariness of what I am, in fact, thinking of, talking about, and doing from hour to hour.

O God, I want to live in every way as your beloved today so that...

LETTING GO

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you and I will bless you.” (Genesis 12:1-2)

Praying means being constantly ready to let go of your certainty and to move on further than where you now are. It demands that you take to the road again and again, leaving your house and looking forward to a new land for yourself and your fellowman. This is why praying demands poverty, that is, the readiness to live a life in which you have nothing to lose so that you always begin afresh. Whenever you willingly choose this poverty you make yourself vulnerable, but you also become free to see the world and to let the world be seen in its true form.



For you have no need to defend yourself and you can tell loudly what you know through your intimate contact with him who is the source of all life. But this demands courage. If you are to make real all the consequences of a prayerful life, you might well be frightened and wonder if you should dare. Then it is vital to remember that courage is also a gift from God for which you can pray.

Jesus, give me the courage to go where you call me. Today I will...

SOLITUDE TO BE WITH GOD

“Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matthew 6:6)

Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life. Solitude begins with a time and place for God, and Him alone. If we really believe not only that God exists but also that He is actively present in our lives—healing, teaching and guiding—we need to set aside a time and space to give Him our undivided attention.

To bring some solitude into our lives is one of the most necessary but also most difficult disciplines. Even though we may have a deep desire

for real solitude, we also experience a certain apprehension as we approach that solitary place and time. As soon as we are alone, without people to talk with, books to read, TV to watch, or phone calls to make, an inner chaos opens up in us. This chaos can be so disturbing and so confusing that we can hardly wait to get busy again. It is thus not surprising that we have a difficult time being alone. The confrontation with our inner conflicts can be too painful for us to endure.

Jesus, help me find quiet in my day to be with you. Today I will...

Monday, Week 3

LISTENING TO GOD'S VOICE

“Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.”

(Revelation 3:20)

In solitude we can slowly unmask the illusion of our possessiveness and discover in the center of our own self that we are not what we can conquer, but what is given to us. In solitude we can listen to the voice of him who spoke to us before we could speak a word, who healed us before we could make any gesture to help, who set us free long before we could free others, and who loved us long before we could give love to anyone. It is in this solitude that we discover that being is more important than having, and that we are worth more than the result of our efforts. In solitude we discover that our life is not a possession to be defended, but a gift to be shared. It's there we recognize that the healing words we speak are not just our own, but are given to us; that the love we can express is part of a greater love; and that the new life we bring forth is not a property to cling to, but a gift to be received.



Jesus, open my mind and heart to listen to your voice in the solitude...

FINDING OUR QUIET CENTER

“In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” (Mark 1:35)

To live a Christian life means to live in the world without being of it. It is in solitude that this inner freedom can grow. Jesus went to a lonely place to pray, that is, to grow in the awareness that all the power he had was given to him; that all the words he spoke came from his Father; and that all the works he did were not really his but the works of the One who had sent him. In the lonely place Jesus was made free to fail. A life without a lonely place, that is, a life without a quiet center, easily becomes destructive. When we cling to the results of our actions as our only way of self-identification, then we become possessive and defensive and tend to look at our fellow human beings more as enemies to be kept at a distance than as friends with whom we share the gifts of life.

Jesus, be with me today in my solitude so that...

QUIETING OUR HEARTS

“I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest; but trouble comes.” (Job 3:26)

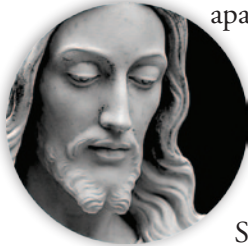
Although the discipline of solitude asks us to set aside time and space, what finally matters is that our hearts become like quiet cells where God can dwell, wherever we go and whatever we do. The more we train ourselves to spend time with God and Him alone, the more we will discover that God is with us at all times and in all places. Then we will be able to recognize Him even in the midst of a busy and active life. Once the solitude of time and space has become a solitude of the heart, we will never have to leave that solitude. We will be able to live the spiritual life in any place and any time. Thus the discipline of solitude enables us to live active lives in the world, while remaining always in the presence of the living God.

Jesus, help me recognize you today in all the moments of my life so that...

FINDING OUR TRUE SELF IN GOD

“God is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:27-28)

The depth of our belonging to God is revealed by Jesus. His relation with God through the Holy Spirit is one of total openness. Everything Jesus owns is a gift from the Father. He never claims anything as just his apart from God. He says that we are called to enter the same relationship with the Father that he has, doing all that he does. In sending us the Holy Spirit, he says that we will be led into a full, intimate relationship with God, so that we won't have to be victims of the world's spirit.



Spiritually we are *in* God, *in* the Lord, *at home* in God. Our true identity is that we are God's children. It is from that perspective—from God's perspective—that we perceive the world. We are called to see the world as God sees it; that is what theology is all about. Therefore, we are continually diagnosing the illusory quality of anything outside this perspective.

Jesus, help me find my true self in you so that...

GOD'S GENTLE SPIRIT

“For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation.”
(Psalm 62:1)

While being so busy running my own life, I become oblivious to the gentle movements of the Spirit of God within me, pointing me in directions quite different from my own.

It requires a lot of inner solitude and silence to become aware of these divine movements. God does not shout, scream, or push. The Spirit of God is soft and gentle like a small voice or a light breeze. It is the spirit of love. Maybe we still do not fully believe that God's Spirit is, indeed, the Spirit of love, always leading us deeper into love. Maybe we still distrust the Spirit, afraid to be led to places where our freedom is taken away.

Maybe we still think of God's Spirit as an enemy who wants something of us that is not good for us.

But God is love, only love, and God's Spirit is the Spirit of love longing to guide us to the place where the deepest desires of our heart can be fulfilled.

Jesus, lead me deeper each day into your all-embracing love so that...

Saturday, Week 3

I WON'T STOP PRAYING

“Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”

(Colossians 3:3)

Lord, in the midst of much inner turmoil and restlessness, there is a consoling thought: maybe you are working in me in a way I cannot yet feel, experience or understand. My mind is not able to concentrate on you, my heart is notable to remain centered, and it seems as if you are absent and have left me alone. But in faith I cling to you. I believe that your Spirit reaches deeper and further than my mind or heart, and that profound movements are not the first to be noticed.

Therefore, Lord, I promise I will not run away, not give up, not stop praying, even when it all seems useless, pointless, and a waste of time and effort. I want to let you know that I love you even though I do not feel loved by you, and that I hope in you even though I often experience despair. Let this be a little dying I can do with you and for you as a way of experiencing some solidarity with the millions in this world who suffer far more than I do.



Jesus, help me to persevere in my prayer so that...

GOD'S HIDDEN PRESENCE

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” (Mark 1:15)

For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, much in our fleeting lives is not passing but lasting, not dying but coming to life, not temporary but eternal. Amid the fragility of our lives, we have wonderful reason to hope. Some call this hidden reality “grace,” others “God’s life in us,” others still “the kingdom of God among us.”



In many ways that is what is meant by the term *the spiritual life*—the nurturing of the eternal amid the temporal, the lasting within the passing, God’s presence in the human family. It is the life of the divine Spirit within us.

Become aware of this mysterious presence and life turns around. You sense joy even as others nurse complaints, you experience peace while the world conspires in war, and you find hope even when headlines broadcast despair. You discover a deep love even while the air around you seems pervaded by hatred.

Jesus, help me to discover your deep love in all I think and say.

Monday, Week 4

WHERE ARE YOU, GOD?

“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?” (Psalm 13:1)

God is “beyond,” beyond our heart and mind, beyond our feelings and thoughts, beyond our expectations and desires, and beyond all the events and experiences that make up our life. Still he is in the center of all of it. Here we touch the heart of prayer since here it becomes manifest that in prayer the distinction between God’s presence and God’s absence no longer really distinguishes. In prayer, God’s presence is never separated from his absence and God’s absence is never separated from his presence. His presence is so much beyond the human experience of being together that it quite easily is perceived as absence. His absence, on the other hand, is

often so deeply felt that it leads to a new sense of his presence.

O God, I feel both your absence and your presence. Come to me so that...

Tuesday, Week 4

GOD IS AT WORK IN ME

“My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” (Exodus 33:14)

The simple fact of being for one hour in the presence of the Lord and of showing him all that I feel, think, sense, and experience, without trying to hide anything, must please him. Somehow, somewhere, I know that he loves me, even though I do not feel that love as I can feel a human embrace, even though I do not hear a voice as I hear human words of consolation, even though I do not see a smile as I can see a human face. Still the Lord speaks to me, looks at me, and embraces me there, where I am still unable to notice it.

God is greater than my senses, greater than my thoughts; greater than my heart. I do believe that he touches me in places that are unknown even to myself. I seldom can point directly to these places; but when I feel this inner pull to return again to that hidden hour of prayer, I realize that something is happening that is so deep that it becomes like the riverbed through which the waters can safely flow and find their way to the open sea.

*O God, help me to know that you are with me.
I want to be with you today by...*

Wednesday, Week 4

THE PRAYER OF MIND AND HEART

“You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy.”
(Psalm 16:11)

To stand in the presence of God with our mind in our heart, that is the essence of the prayer of the heart. The prayer of the heart unifies our whole person and places us without any reservation, mind in heart, in the awesome and loving presence of our God.

If prayer were just an intelligent exercise of our mind, we would soon become stranded in fruitless and trivial inner debates with God. If, on the other hand, prayer would involve only our heart, we might soon think that good prayers consist in good feelings. But the prayer of the heart in the most profound sense unites mind and heart in the intimacy of the divine love. The prayer of the heart can be a special guide to the present-day Christian searching for his own personal way to an intimate relationship to God.

Jesus, attune my head and heart to your Spirit so that today...

Thursday, Week 4

EMBRACING SILENCE

“So, could you not stay awake with me one hour?” (Matthew 26:40)

Have you ever tried to spend a whole hour doing nothing but listening to the voice that dwells deep in your heart? When there is no radio to listen to, no TV to watch, no book to read, no person to talk to, no project to finish, no phone call to make, how does that make you feel?

Often it does no more than make us so aware of how much there is still to do that we haven't done yet that we decide to leave the fearful silence and go back to work! It is not easy to enter into the silence and reach beyond the many boisterous and demanding voices of our world and to discover there the small intimate voice saying: “You are my Beloved Child, on you my favor rests.” Still, if we dare to embrace our solitude and befriend our silence, we will come to know that voice. I do not want to suggest to you that one day you will hear that voice with your bodily ears. I am not speaking about a hallucinatory voice, but about a voice that can be heard by the ear of faith, the ear of the inner heart.



O God, help me dwell in silence with you each day. Today, I will...

GOD IS AT WORK IN US

“Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.”

(Psalm 22:11)

Often you will feel that nothing happens in your prayer. You say: “I am just sitting there and getting distracted.” But if you develop the discipline of spending one half hour a day listening to the voice of love, you will gradually discover that something is happening of which you were not even conscious. It might be only in retrospect that you discover the voice that blesses you. You thought that what happened during your time of listening was nothing more than a lot of confusion, but then you discover yourself looking forward to your quiet time. The movement of God’s Spirit is very gentle, very soft—and hidden. It does not seek attention. But that movement is also very persistent, strong and deep. It changes our hearts radically. The faithful discipline of prayer reveals to you that you are the blessed one and gives you the power to bless others.

Jesus, keep working to transform me from within so that...

LISTENING TO GOD’S QUIET VOICE

“O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!”

(Psalm 81:13)

For me personally, prayer becomes more and more a way to listen to the blessing. I have read and written much about prayer, but when I go to a quiet place to pray, I realize that, although I have a tendency to say many thing good things to God, the real “work” of prayer is to become silent and listen to the voice that says good things about me. This might sound self-indulgent, but, in practice, it is a hard discipline. I am so afraid of being cursed, of hearing that I am no good or not good enough, that I quickly give in to the temptation to start talking and to keep talking in order to control my fears. To gently push aside and silence the many voices that question my goodness and to trust that I will hear a voice of blessing—that demands real effort.

Jesus, help me quiet the noise of my life to listen to you.

AWAKENING OURSELVES TO GOD

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you, O LORD.” (Psalm 19:14)

The practice of contemplative prayer is the discipline by which we begin to see God in our heart. It is a careful attentiveness to him who dwells in the center of our being such that through the recognition of his presence we allow him to take possession of all our senses. Through the discipline of prayer we awaken ourselves to the God in us and let him enter into our heartbeat and our breathing, into our thoughts and emotions, our hearing, seeing, touching, and tasting. It is by being awake to this God in us that we can see him in the world around us. The great mystery of the contemplative life is not that we see God in the world, but that God within us recognizes God in the world. God speaks to God, Spirit speaks to Spirit, heart speaks to heart. Contemplation, therefore, is a participation in this divine self recognition. It is the divine Spirit praying in us who makes our world transparent and opens our eyes to the presence of the divine Spirit in all that surrounds us. It is with our heart of hearts that we see the heart of the world. This explains the intimate relationship between contemplation and ministry.

*Jesus, help me see into the heart of the world
to discover your loving presence so that...*

Monday, Week 5

THE ONE NECESSARY THING

“In Christ Jesus, the only thing that counts is faith working through love.”
(Galatians 5:6)

Jesus does not respond to our worry-filled way of living by saying that we should not be so busy with worldly affairs. He does not try to pull us away from the many events, activities and people that make up our lives. He does not tell us that what we do is unimportant, valueless or useless. Nor does He suggest that we should withdraw from our involvements and live quiet, restful lives removed from the struggles of the world.

Jesus' response to our worry-filled lives is quite different. He asks us

to shift the point of gravity, to relocate the center of our attention, to change our priorities. Jesus wants us to move from the “many things” to the “one necessary thing.” It is important for us to realize that Jesus in no way wants us to leave our many-faceted world. Rather, He wants us to live in it, but firmly rooted in the center of all things. Jesus does not speak about a change of activities, a change in contacts, or even a change of pace. He speaks about a change of heart. This change of heart makes everything different, even while everything appears to remain the same.

Jesus, help me center my whole life on you so that...

Tuesday, Week 5

OUR RESTLESS HEARTS

“May God grant you your heart’s desire, and fulfill all your plans.”
(Psalm 10:7)

What do we really desire? As I try to listen to my own deepest yearning as well as to the yearnings of others, the word that seems best to summarize the desire of the human heart is “communion.” Communion means “union with.” God has given us a heart that will remain restless until it has found full communion. We look for it in friendship, in marriage, in community. We look for it in sexual intimacy, in moments of ecstasy, in the recognition of our gifts. We look for it through success, admiration, and rewards. But wherever we look, it is communion that we seek.



Jesus came to proclaim that our desire for communion is not in vain, but will be fulfilled by the One who gave us that desire. The passing moments of communion are only hints of the Communion that God has promised us. A truly spiritual life is life in which we won't rest until we have found rest in the embrace of the One who is the Father and Mother of all desires.

Jesus, I desire to be with you today so that...

CONTINUING JESUS' MISSION

“As you have sent me into the world,
so I have sent them into the world.” (John 17:18)

To be lifted up into the divine life of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit does not mean to be taken out of the world. On the contrary, those who have entered into the spiritual life are precisely the ones who are sent into the world to continue and fulfill the work that Jesus began. The spiritual life does not remove us from the world but leads us deeper into it.

Jesus makes it clear that precisely because His disciples no longer belong to the world, they can live in the world as He did: Life in the Spirit of Jesus is therefore a life in which Jesus' coming into the world—His incarnation, His death and resurrection—is lived out by those who have entered into the same obedient relationship to the Father which marked Jesus' own life. Having become sons and daughters as Jesus was Son, our lives become a continuation of Jesus' mission.

Jesus, help me to be attentive to those to whom I am sent today so that...

TRANSFORMED BY THE SPIRIT OF LOVE

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed
by the renewing of your minds.” (Romans 12:2)

Being in the world without being of the world: These words summarize well the way Jesus speaks of the spiritual life. It is a life in which we are totally transformed by the Spirit of love. Yet it is a life in which everything seems to remain the same. To live a spiritual life does not mean that we must leave our families, give up our jobs, or change our ways of working; it does not mean that we have to withdraw from social or political activities, or lose interest in literature and art; it does not require severe forms of asceticism or long hours of prayer. Changes such as these may in fact grow out of our spiritual life, and for some people radical decisions may be necessary. But the spiritual life can be lived in as many ways as there are people. What is new is that we have moved from the

many things to the kingdom of God. What is new is that we are set free from the compulsions of our world and have set our hearts on the only necessary thing. What is new is that we no longer experience the many things, people, and events as endless causes for worry but begin to experience them as the rich variety of ways in which God makes His presence known to us.

Jesus, help me change myself and my life to be like you so that...

Friday, Week 5

DISCOVERING GOD IN OTHERS

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40)

One of the discoveries we make in prayer is that the closer we come to God, the closer we come to all our brothers and sisters in the human family. God is not a private God. The God who dwells in our inner sanctuary is also the God who dwells in the inner sanctuary of each human being. As we recognize God’s presence in our own hearts, we can also recognize that presence in the hearts of others, because the God who has chosen us as a dwelling-place gives us the eyes to see the God who dwells in others. When we see only demons within ourselves, we can see only demons in others, but when we see God within ourselves, we can see God also in others.



This might sound rather theoretical, but when we pray, we will increasingly experience ourselves as part of a human family infinitely bound by God who created us to share, all of us, in the divine light.

Jesus, alert me to your hidden presence in others today so that...

WE ARE NEVER ALONE

“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15)

The great secret in life is that suffering, which often seems to be so unbearable, can become, through compassion, a source of new life and new hope.

God has become human so as to be able, in all completeness, to live with us, suffer with us and die with us. We have found in Jesus a fellow human being who is so completely one with us that not a single weakness, pain or temptation has remained foreign to him. Precisely because Jesus is God and without any sin, he is able to experience our sinful, broken human condition so thoroughly that we may say he knows us better than we know ourselves and loves us more than we love ourselves. No one else, however well disposed, is ever in a position to be with us so completely that we feel ourselves to be understood and loved without limit. We humans remain too self-centered to be able to forget ourselves fully for the other person's sake. But Jesus does give himself fully, he holds nothing back for himself, he wants to be with us in so total a fashion.

Jesus, help me know that you are with me in my times of trouble so that...

Passion/Palm Sunday of Lent

FOLLOWING THE WAY OF JESUS

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” (Luke 23:46)

To return to God means to return to God with all that I am and all that I have. I cannot return to God with just half of my being.

It is going to be a very long road. Every time I pray, I feel the struggle. It is the struggle of letting God be the God of my whole being. It is the struggle to trust that true freedom lies hidden in total surrender to God's love.

Following Jesus is the way to enter into the struggle and find true freedom. The way is the way of the cross, and true freedom is the freedom found in the victory over death. Jesus' total obedience to his Father led

him to the cross, and through the cross to a life no longer subject to the competitive games of this world. Jesus held on to nothing, not even to satisfying religious experiences. Nothing was left for him to cling to. In this complete surrender he found total unity and total freedom.

Jesus, I desire to follow you no matter where it leads me. Today I will...

Monday Holy Week

GOING BEYOND OUR WOUNDEDNESS

“You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” (Psalm 86:15)

We are a wounded people. Who wounds us? Often those whom we love and those who love us. When we feel rejected, abandoned, abused, manipulated, or violated, it is mostly by people very close to us: our parents, our friends, our spouses, our lovers, our children, our neighbors, our teachers, our pastors. Those who love us wound us too. That’s the tragedy of our lives. This is what makes forgiveness from the heart so difficult. It is precisely our hearts that are wounded. We cry out, “You, who I expected to be there for me, you have abandoned me. How can I ever forgive you for that?” Forgiveness often seems impossible, but nothing is impossible for God. The God who lives within us will give us the grace to go beyond our wounded selves and say, “In the Name of God you are forgiven.” Let’s pray for that grace.

Jesus, lead me beyond my wounded self to forgive others so that...

Tuesday Holy Week

THE STRUGGLE TO FORGIVE

“How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to Peter, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” (Matthew 18:21-22)

It is hard for me to forgive someone who has really offended me, especially when it happens more than once. I begin to doubt the sincerity of the one who asks forgiveness for a second, third, or fourth time. But God

does not keep count. God just waits for our return, without resentment or desire for revenge. God wants us home.

Maybe the reason it seems hard for me to forgive others is that I do not fully believe that I am a forgiven person. If I could fully accept the truth that I am forgiven and do not have to live in guilt or shame, I would really be free. My freedom would allow me to forgive others seventy times seven times. By not forgiving, I chain myself to a desire to get even, thereby losing my freedom. A forgiven person forgives. This is what we proclaim when we pray, “and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us.”

This lifelong struggle lies at the heart of the Christian life.

Jesus, I have so often been forgiven. Today I will forgive...

Wednesday Holy Week

LOOK AT ME, LORD

“O Lord, look down from your holy dwelling, and consider us. Incline your ear, O Lord, and hear; open your eyes, O Lord, and see.” (Baruch 2:17)

O Lord Jesus, I look at you, and my are fixed only on your eyes. Your eyes penetrate the eternal mystery of the divine and see the glory of God. Your eyes, O Lord, see in one glance the inexhaustible love of God and the seemingly endless agony of all people who have lost faith in that love and are like sheep without a shepherd.

As I look into your eyes, they frighten me because they pierce like flames of fire my innermost being, but they console me as well, because these flames are purifying and healing. Your eyes are so severe yet so loving, so unmasking yet so protecting, so penetrating yet so caressing, so profound, yet so intimate, so distant yet so inviting.

I gradually realize that I want to be seen by you, to dwell under your caring gaze, and to grow strong and gentle in your sight. Lord, let me see what you see—the love of God and the suffering of people—so that my eyes may become more and more like yours, eyes that can heal wounded hearts.

*Jesus, help me see the world as you do so that I might act like you.
Today I will...*

NOT ME LORD!

“You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” (John 13:13-15)

O, Lord, you kneel before me; you hold my naked feet in your hands, and you look up at me and smile. Within me I feel the protest arising, “No, Lord, you shall never wash my feet.” It is as if I were resisting the love you offer me. I want to say, “You don’t really know me, my dark feelings, my pride, my lust, my greed. I may speak the right words, but my heart is so far from you. No, I am not good enough to belong to you. You must have someone else in mind, not me.” But you look at me with utter tenderness, saying, “I want you to be with me. I want you to have a full share in my life. I want you to belong to me as much as I belong to my Father. I want to wash you completely clean so that you and I can be one and so that you can do to others what I have done to you.” I have to let go of all my fears, distrust, doubts and anguish and simply let you wash me clean and make me your friend whom you love with a love that has no bounds.



*Jesus, help me to give up my resistance to your love
so I can be more like you today...*

THROUGH DEATH TO VICTORY

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24)

When he was dying on the cross, Jesus was ultimately vulnerable. He had nothing left. Everything had been taken from him, including his dignity, and in the eyes of his culture he was a failure. But in all truth the moment of his death on the cross was his life’s greatest moment, because there his life became the most fruitful one in all history. Jesus saw his life and his death as fruitful. “It is good for you that I go. I will send you my Spirit.”

Our weakness and old age call people to surround us and support us. By not resisting weakness and by gratefully receiving another's care we call forth community and provide our caregivers an opportunity to give their own gifts of compassion, care, love, and service. As we are given into their hands, others are blessed and enriched by caring for us. Our weakness bears fruit in their lives.

And dying is our ultimate vulnerability. Instead of looking at the weakness of old age as simply the experience of loss after loss, we can choose it as a passage to emptiness where our hearts have room to be filled with the Spirit of Love overflowing. It is ultimate weakness, but it is also potentially the greatest moment of our fruitfulness.

*Jesus, help me die to my sinfulness to live fully in you and for others.
Today I will...*

Holy Saturday

NEW LIFE STRONGER THAN DEATH

“When you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD.” (Jeremiah 29:12-14)

The fact that I am always searching for God, always struggling to discover the fullness of Love, always yearning for the complete truth, tells me that I have already been given a taste of God, of Love and of Truth. I can only look for something that I have, to some degree, already found. How can I search for beauty and truth unless that beauty and truth are already known to me in the depth of my heart? It seems that all of us human beings have deep inner memories of the paradise that we have lost. Maybe the word “innocence” is better than the word “paradise.” We are innocent before we started feeling guilty; we were in the light before we entered the darkness; we were at home before we started to search for a home. Deep in the recesses of our minds and hearts there lies hidden the treasure we seek. We know its preciousness, and we know that it holds the gift we most desire: a life stronger than death.

*O God, I continually search for you.
Show yourself so that I might rejoice and live for you...*

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A TIME OF HOPE

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?
He is not here, but has risen.” (Luke 24:5)

The Easter season is a time of hope. There still is fear, there still is a painful awareness of sinfulness, but there also is light breaking through. Something new is happening, something that goes beyond the changing moods of our life. We can be joyful or sad, optimistic or pessimistic, tranquil or angry, but the solid stream of God’s presence moves deeper than the small waves of our minds and hearts. Easter brings the awareness that God is present even when his presence is not directly noticed. Easter brings the good news that, although things seem to get worse in the world, the Evil One has already been overcome. Easter allows us to affirm that although God seems very distant and although we remain preoccupied with many little things, our Lord walks with us on the road and keeps explaining the Scriptures to us. Thus there are many rays of hope casting their light on our way through life.

Jesus, fill me with your new life so that renewed in spirit I might...

