



*Returning*  
to  
**GOD**

A LENTEN JOURNEY WITH

**HENRI J.M. NOUWEN**

## INTRODUCTION

As the title of this booklet suggests, there are two overarching themes that can help us focus our Lenten experience. The first theme is conversion—turning ourselves around and returning to the central figure of our spiritual lives, Jesus Christ. The spiritual life not just about trying to get to heaven but even more about trying to become more and more fully related right now to God through Christ in the Holy Spirit.

The second theme is that of a journey, which reminds us especially that no matter where we start from, our daily challenge is to overcome obstacles in our path and get to the intended destination. But for us Christians, the real end is not a place like heaven but a person, in fact three persons, our triune God. Our life, like our Lent, is a spiritual journey both with God and into God.

To guide us on this spiritual journey of conversion we turn to Fr. Henri Nouwen (1932-1996), one of the most important spiritual writers of the last part of the twentieth century. His own journey through those turbulent times provides insights into many important dimensions of our spiritual lives: conversion as a reorienting of ourselves and our lives to God, prayer as the discipline of being present with God, compassion and love as characteristics of both ministry and relationships, and trust that the fearful experiences of pain and suffering do indeed lead to new life. As Nouwen reminds us in his book *Sabbatical Journey: The Diary of His Final Year*:

*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. Lent is a time of refocusing, of reentering the place of truth, of reclaiming our true identity as beloved sons and daughters of God.*

—Steve Mueller, Editor

ASH WEDNESDAY

## GREAT EXPECTATIONS

*“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 2:12-13)*

O Lord, I enter into this holy season of Lent with fear, but also with great expectations. I hope for a great breakthrough, a powerful conversion, a real change of heart. I want Easter to be a day so full of light that not even a trace of darkness would be left in my soul. But I know that you do not come to your people with thunder and lightning. Even St. Paul and St. Francis journeyed through much darkness before they could see your light. Let me be thankful for your gentle way. I know you are at work. I know you will not leave me alone. I know you are quickening me for Easter but in a way fitting to my own history and temperament. I pray that as you invite me to enter more fully into the mystery of your passion, you will bring me a greater desire to follow you on the way that you create for me and to accept the cross that you give to me. Let me die to the desire to choose my own way and select my own cross. You do not want to make me a hero but a servant who loves you. Be with me tomorrow and in the days to come, and let me experience your gentle presence. Amen.



*Jesus, be my daily companion on my Lenten journey.*

THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

## PUT GOD'S KINGDOM FIRST

*“Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:33)*

These words of Jesus summarize best the way we are called to live our lives—with our hearts set on God's kingdom. That kingdom is not some faraway land that we hope to reach, nor is it life after death or an ideal state of affairs. No. God's kingdom is, first of all, the active presence of God's Spirit within us, offering us the freedom we truly desire. And so the main question becomes: How to set our hearts

on the kingdom first when our hearts are preoccupied with so many things? Somehow a radical change of heart is required, a change that allows us to experience the reality of our existence from God's place. Indeed, true conversion asks for a lot more than a change of place. It asks for a change of heart.

*Jesus, help me put you and your kingdom community first in my life.*

FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

## THE ONE NECESSARY THING

*“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; only one thing is necessary.” (Luke 10:41-42)*

Jesus' asks us to shift the point of gravity, to relocate the center of our attention, to change our priorities. He wants us to move from the “many things” to the “one necessary thing.” He 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. He 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 that makes everything different, even while everything appears to remain the same. What counts is where our hearts are. When we worry, we have our hearts in the wrong place. Jesus asks us to move our hearts to the center, where all other things fall into place. His words are an urgent call to make the life of God's Spirit our priority can we see better what is at stake. A heart set on the Father's kingdom is also a heart set on the spiritual life. To set our hearts on the kingdom therefore means to make the life of the Spirit within and among us the center of all we think, say, or do.

*Jesus, help me focus on what is most necessary to be with you.*

SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

## GOD'S SPIRIT IS PURE GIFT

*“Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” (Genesis 2:7)*

Perhaps the challenge of the gospel lies precisely in the invitation to accept a gift for which we can give nothing in return. For the gift is the life breath of God, the Spirit who is poured out on us through

Jesus Christ. This life breath frees us from fear and gives us new room to live. A person who prayerfully goes about his life is constantly ready to receive the breath of God, and to let his life be renewed and expanded. The one who never prays, on the contrary, is like the child with asthma; because he is short of breath, the whole world shrivels up before him. He creeps in a corner gasping for air, and is virtually in agony. But the one who prays opens himself to God and can freely breathe again. He stands upright, stretches out his hands and comes out of his corner, free to boldly stride through the world because he can move about without fear.

*O God, send out your Spirit to renew and change me today so that...*

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

## DO YOU WANT TO CHANGE?

*“When Jesus saw the paralyzed man lying there...he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” (John 5:6)*

The spiritual life is not lived outside, before, after, or beyond our everyday existence. No, the spiritual life can be real only as it is lived in the midst of the pains and joys of the here and now. Therefore, we need to begin with a careful look at the way we think, speak, feel, and act from hour to hour, day to day, week to week, and year to year, in order to become more fully aware of our hunger for the Spirit. As long as we have only a vague inner feeling of discontent with our present way of living, and only an indefinite desire for “things spiritual,” our lives will continue to stagnate in a generalized melancholy. We often say, “I am not very happy. I am not content with the way my life is going. I am not really joyful or peaceful. But I don’t know how things can be different, and I guess I have to be realistic and accept my life as it is.” It is this mood of resignation that prevents us from actively naming our reality, articulating our experience and moving more deeply into the life of the Spirit.



*Jesus, help me change what most needs it in my relationship with you.*

MONDAY, WEEK 1

## CENTERING MY LIFE ON GOD

*“You are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God.” (Psalm 86:10)*

What is central to me is: I exist. However, as soon as I say, “God exists,” my existence no longer can remain in the center, because the essence of the knowledge of God reveals my own existence as deriving its total being from God’s. That is the true conversion experience. I no longer let my existence be the center from which I derive, project, deduct or intuit the existence of God. I suddenly or slowly find my own existence revealed to me in and through the knowledge of God. Then it becomes real for me that I can love myself and my neighbor only because God has loved me first. The life-converting experience is not the discovery that I have choices to make that determine the way I live out my existence, but the awareness that my existence itself is not in the center. Once I “know” God, that is, once I experience God’s love as the love in which all my human experiences are anchored, I can desire only one thing: to be in that love.



*God, I want to know you more fully.*

TUESDAY, WEEK 1

## CREATING SPACE FOR GOD

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

The discipline of prayer is the intentional, concentrated, and regular effort to create space for God. Everything and everyone around us wants to fill up every bit of space in our lives and so make us not only occupied people, but preoccupied people as well. When we permit the world to pack our minds and hearts with countless things to look at, listen to and read about, and countless people to visit, write to, talk to and worry about, how do we focus and keep a space for God? When we pray, we enter into the presence of God whose name is Emmanuel—God-with-us. To pray is to listen attentively to the One who addresses us here and now. When we dare to trust that we are never alone but that God is always with us, always cares for us, and always

speaks to us, we can gradually detach ourselves from the voices that make us feel guilty or anxious, and embrace the present moment. If we could, for a few minutes each day, just be fully where we are, we would indeed discover that we are not alone, and that the One who is with us in our hearts wants only to give us the love we need and the power to love others.

*Jesus, help me find more space in my life and my heart for you.*

WEDNESDAY, WEEK 1

## I WANT TO BE CLEANSED

*“Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD of hosts. But you say, “How shall we return?” (Malachi 3:7)*

I want to be purified. I want to be cleansed. The people of Israel were led through the Red Sea; Jesus was baptized in the Jordan; someone poured water over my head shortly after I was born. Blessed are the pure of heart; they shall see God. I am looking. I am listening. Do I see and hear? I want to but I cannot force myself. Everything comes back to the basic questions: Do you want to see: Do you want to let go of your sin? Do you want to repent: I do, I do, but I do not know how to make it happen.



*Jesus, help me put aside the obstacles that keep me from you.*

THURSDAY, WEEK 1

## LOVING IS HARD WORK

*“Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: ‘Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.’ And he went out and wept bitterly.”*

*(Matthew 26:75)*

Jesus came to open my ears to another voice that calls us always to return to the one who has created us in love and wants to re-create us in mercy. Peter heard that voice and trusted it. As he let that voice touch his heart, tears came—tears of sorrow and tears of joy, tears of remorse and tears of peace, tears of repentance and tears of gratitude. It is not easy to let the voice of God’s mercy speak to us because it is

a voice asking for an always open relationship, one in which sins are acknowledged, forgiveness received and love renewed. It does not offer us a solution, but a friendship. It does not take away our problems, but promises not to avoid them. It does not tell us where it all will end, but assures us that we will never be alone. A true relationship is hard work because loving is hard work, with many tears and many smiles.

*God, help me listen to your invitation to return to you.*

FRIDAY, WEEK 1

## IF GOD COULD SPEAK TO YOU NOW

*“O that today you would listen to God’s voice! Do not harden your hearts.”*  
*(Psalm 95:7-8)*

“I am your God, I have molded you with my own hands, and I love you with a love that has no limits. Do not run away but come back to me—not once, not twice, but always. You are my child. Please do not say that I have given up on you, that I cannot stand you anymore, that there is no way back. It is not true. I so much want you to be with me, to be close to me. I know all your thoughts, hear all your words, see all of your actions. And I love you because you are beautiful, made in my own image, an expression of my most intimate love. Do not judge or condemn yourself. Do not reject yourself. Let my love touch the deepest, most hidden corners of your heart and reveal to you your own beauty, a beauty that you have lost sight of, but which will become visible to you again in the light of my mercy. Come, come, let me wipe your tears, and let my mouth come close to your ear and say to you, ‘I love you, I love you, I love you.’”

*God, help me realize how much you love me and want to be with me.*

SATURDAY, WEEK 1

## LOVE ME, LORD

*“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”*  
*(John 15:9)*

O Lord, how can I ever go anywhere else but to you to find the love I so desire! How can I expect from people as sinful as myself a love that can touch me in the most hidden corners of my being? Who



can wash me clean as you do and give me food and drink as you do? Who wants me to be so close, so intimate and so safe as you do? O Lord, your love is not an intangible love, a love that remains words and thoughts. No, Lord, your love is a love that comes from your human heart. It is a heart-felt love that expresses itself through your whole being. You speak, you look, you touch, you give me food. Yes, you make your love a love that reaches all the senses of my body and holds me as a mother holds her child, embraces me as a father embraces his son and touches me as a brother touches his sister and brother.

*Jesus, how can I thank you for your constant love?*

2ND SUNDAY OF LENT

## REVEALING GOD'S HIDDEN PRESENCE

*"No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." (John 1:18)*

Jesus reveals to us the hidden presence of God. God who is the most different one, the most distinct one, the most "other," became the most hidden one, the one who is most the same. The experience of being the same, of being one with others, of being truly part of humanity is a profoundly joyful and freeing experience. We are hidden in creation, hidden among our fellow human beings. That is the basis of true humility. We are to live close to the ground of our humanity. We are dust returning to dust. This humility is not self-rejecting, but self-affirming, since it offers a deeper sense of our embeddedness. Everything that Jesus says and does during his public life needs to be heard and seen as coming from the one whose life is first and foremost a life hidden among us. Jesus' death then becomes the full living out of this hiddenness. He lives his life out in such an intimate solidarity with us that we can say that he is more fully alive than any other human being. It is through this human "sameness" that we can come to share in his divine life.



*Jesus, help me live out my humble hidden life as you did.*

MONDAY, WEEK 2

## FORMED BY GOD'S WORD

*"I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word." (Psalm 119:15-16)*

The Bible is primarily a book not of information but of formation, not merely a book to be analyzed, scrutinized and discussed but a



sacred book to nurture us, to unify our hearts and minds and to serve as a constant source of contemplation. It is important to guard against the temptation to read the Bible programmatically as a book full of good stories and telling illustrations that can help us with instant advice, sermons, lectures, papers and articles. As long as we deal with the Word of

God as an instrument with which we can do many useful things, we don't really read the Bible. The Bible does not speak to us as long as we want only to use it. But when we are willing to hear the Word as a word for us, sacred scripture can disclose itself, and its message can penetrate into the center of our hearts. This is far from easy, because it requires openness and the constant willingness to be converted, and to be led to places where we would rather not go (John 21:18).

*Jesus, help me be more faithful to my daily scripture reading.*

TUESDAY, WEEK 2

## THE POWER OF GOD'S WORD

*"God's word is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12)*

The Word of God is not a word to apply in our daily lives at some later date; it is a word to heal us through, and in, our listening here and now. The questions therefore are: How does God come to me as I listen to the word? Where do I discern the healing hand of God touching me through the word? How are my sadness, my grief, and my mourning being transformed at this very moment? Do I sense the fire of God's love purifying my heart and giving me new life? These questions lead me to the sacrament of the word, the sacred place of

God's real presence. At first this might sound quite new for a person living in a society in which the main value of the word is its applicability. But most of us know already, generally unconsciously, of the healing and destroying power of the spoken word. When someone says to me, "I love you," or "I hate you," I am not just receiving some useful information. These words do something in me. They make my blood move, my heart beat, my breathing speed up. They make me feel and think differently. They lift me up to a new way of being and give me another knowledge of myself. These words have the power to heal or to destroy me.

*Jesus, help me be changed when I meet you in your Word.*

WEDNESDAY, WEEK 2

## PUT AWAY YOUR FEARS

*"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." (1 John 4:18)*

Though we think of ourselves as followers of Jesus, we are often seduced by the fearful questions the world presents to us. Without fully realizing it, we become anxious, nervous, worrying people caught in the questions of survival: our own survival, the survival of our families, friends, and colleagues, the survival of our church, our country, and our world. Once these fearful survival questions become the guiding questions of our lives, we tend to dismiss words spoken from the house of love as unrealistic, romantic, sentimental, pious or just useless. When love is offered as an alternative to fear we say: "Yes, yes, that sounds beautiful, but..." The "but" reveals how much we live in the grip of the world.

*Jesus, help me face my fears and trust in you with no "buts."*

THURSDAY, WEEK 2

## I NEED YOUR SPIRIT, JESUS

*"When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." (John 16:18)*

Lord, you promised your disciples that you would send the Holy Spirit to guide them and lead them to the full Truth. I feel like I am groping in the dark. I have received much from you, and still it is hard

for me simply to be quiet and present in your presence. My mind is so chaotic, so full of dispersed ideas, plans, memories and fantasies. I want to be with you and you alone, concentrate on your Word, listen to your voice and look at you as you reveal yourself to your friends. But even with the best intentions I wander off to less important things and discover that my heart is drawn to my own little worthless treasures. I cannot pray without the power from on high, the power of your Spirit. Send your Spirit, Lord, so that your Spirit can pray in me, can say “Lord Jesus,” and can call out “Abba, Father.” I am waiting, Lord, I am expecting, I am hoping. Do not leave me without your Spirit.

*Jesus, send your Spirit to enlighten and guide me to you.*

FRIDAY, WEEK 2

## PAYING ATTENTION TO BLESSINGS

*“The blessing of the Lord is the reward of the pious, and quickly God causes his blessing to flourish.” (Sirach 11:22)*

One way of claiming your blessedness as God’s beloved child is the cultivation of presence. By presence I mean attentiveness to the blessings that come to you day after day, year after year. The problem of modern living is that we are too busy looking for affirmation in the wrong places to notice that we are being blessed. Often people say good things about us, but we brush them aside with remarks such as, “Oh, don’t mention it, forget about it, it’s nothing” and so on. These remarks may seem to be expressions of humility, but they are, in fact, signs that we are not truly present to receive the blessings that are given. It is not easy for us busy people to truly receive a blessing. Perhaps the fact that few people offer a real blessing is the sad result of the absence of people who are willing and able to receive such a blessing. It has become extremely difficult for us to stop, listen, pay attention and receive gracefully what is offered to us.



*God, help me be more attentive to your many blessings.*

SATURDAY, WEEK 2

## COMING HOME TO GOD

*“In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” (John 14:2)*

Discipline in the spiritual life means a gradual process of coming home to where we belong and listening there to the voice which desires our attention. It is the voice of God’s “first love.” This first love offers us the intimate place where we can dwell in safety. The first love says: “You are loved long before other people can love you or you can love others. You are accepted long before you can accept others or receive their acceptance. You are safe long before you can offer or receive safety.” Home is the place where that first love dwells and speaks gently to us. It requires discipline to come home and listen, especially when our fears are so noisy that they keep driving us outside of ourselves. But when we grasp the truth that we already have a home, we may at last have the strength to unmask the illusions created by our fears and continue to return again and again and again. Conversion, then, means coming home, and prayer is seeking our home where the Lord has built a home—in the intimacy of our own hearts. Prayer is the most concrete way to make our home in God.

*Jesus, help me spend some time every day with you.*

3RD SUNDAY OF LENT

## LISTENING TO THE VOICE OF LOVE

*“O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!” (Psalm 81:13)*

Prayer is the discipline of listening to the voice of love. Jesus spent many nights in prayer listening to the voice that had spoken to him at the Jordan River. We too must pray. Without prayer, we become deaf to the voice of love and become confused by the many competing voices asking for our attention. How difficult this is! When we sit down for half an hour—without talking to someone, listening to music, watching television or reading a book—and try to become very still, we often find ourselves so overwhelmed by our noisy inner voices that we can hardly wait to get busy and distracted again. Our inner life often looks like a banana tree full of jumping monkeys! But

when we decide not to run away and stay focused, these monkeys may gradually go away because of lack of attention, and the soft gentle voice calling us the beloved may gradually make itself heard.

*O God, through my quiet listening help me hear your voice.*

MONDAY, WEEK 3

## THE ADVENTURE OF PRAYER

*“Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’” (Mark 10:21)*

In Jesus, God became one of us to lead us through Jesus into the intimacy of God’s divine life. By giving us his Spirit, his breath, he became closer to us than we are to ourselves. Through this breath of God we can become part of the mysterious divine relationship between Father and Son. Praying in the Spirit means participating in the intimate life of God himself. The paradox of prayer is that it asks for a serious effort while it can only be received as a gift. We cannot plan, organize or manipulate God; but without a careful discipline, we cannot receive him either. When prayer makes us reach out to God, not on our own but on God’s 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.

*Jesus, help me grow closer to you through my daily prayer.*

TUESDAY, WEEK 3

## JUST TURN AROUND!

*“Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.” (Isaiah 45:22)*

Once I saw a mime in which a man was straining to open one of the three doors in the room where he found himself. He pushed and pulled at the doorknobs, but none of the doors would open. Then he

kicked with his feet against the wooden panels of the door, but they didn't break. Finally, he threw his full weight against the doors, but none of them yielded. It was a ridiculous, yet very hilarious sight, because the man was so concentrated on the three locked doors that he didn't even notice that the room had no back wall and that he could simply walk out if he would only turn around and look! That is what conversion is all about. It is a complete turnaround that allows us to discover that we are not the prisoners we think we are. From God's place, we often look like the man who tries to open the locked doors of his room. We worry about many things and even wound ourselves while worrying. God says: "Turn around, set your heart on my kingdom. I give you all the freedom you desire."

*Jesus, help me turn to you and set my heart on your kingdom.*

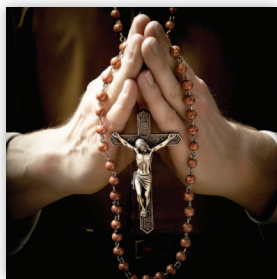
WEDNESDAY, WEEK 3

## OUR HIDDEN LIFE WITH GOD

*"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."*

*(Colossian 3:3)*

Hiddenness is an essential quality of the spiritual life. Solitude, silence, ordinary tasks, being with people without great agendas, sleeping, eating, working, playing—all of that without being different from others—that is the life Jesus lived and the life he asks us to live. In hiddenness we can find a true intimacy with God and a true love for people. Even during his active ministry, Jesus continued to return to hidden places to be alone with God. If we don't have a hidden life with God, our public life for God cannot bear fruit. Solitude allows us to be alone with God. There we experience that we belong not to people, not even to those who love us and care for us, but to God and God alone.



*O God, help me learn to be alone with you so that...*

THURSDAY, WEEK 3

## SEND ME YOUR SPIRIT

*“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13)*

Jesus, even when I know everything about you, even when I have studied all the Scriptures with care, even when I have a great desire and willpower to work in your service, I can do nothing without the gift of your Spirit. Often I realize that the clearest vision of the true life, and the most sincere wish to live it, is not enough to make me a true disciple. Only when your Spirit has entered into the depth of my being can I be a real Christian, a person who lives in and with and through you. I pray for the power of your Spirit. Let this power invade me and transform me into a real disciple, willing to follow you even where I would rather not go.

*Spirit of God, deepen my faith, my hope and my love so that...*

FRIDAY, WEEK 3

## LETTING GO AND MOVING ON

*“Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’” (Genesis 12:1)*

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, help me to follow you wherever you are leading.*



SATURDAY, WEEK 3

## CHOOSE WISELY

*“You are God’s building. Each builder must choose with care how to build.” (1 Corinthians 3:9-10)*

We cannot live a spiritual life alone. The life of the Spirit is like a seed that needs fertile ground to grow. This fertile ground includes not only a good inner disposition, but also a supportive milieu. It is hard to live a life of prayer in a milieu where no one prays or speaks lovingly about prayer. It is nearly impossible to deepen our communion with God when those with whom we live and work reject or even ridicule the idea that there is a loving God. It is a superhuman task to keep setting our hearts on the kingdom when all those whom we know and talk with are setting their hearts on everything but the kingdom. When we are serious about living a spiritual life we are responsible for the milieu where it can grow and mature. Although we might not be able to create the ideal context for a life in the Spirit, we have many more options than we often claim for ourselves. We can choose friends, books, churches, art, music, places to visit and people to be with that, taken together, offer a milieu that allows the mustard seed that God has sown in us to grow into a strong tree.



*Jesus, help me create an environment that leads me to you.*

4TH SUNDAY OF LENT

## BELONGING TO GOD

*“Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate.” (Luke 6:36)*

If God is compassionate, then certainly those who love God should be compassionate as well. The God whom Jesus announces and in whose name he acts is the God of compassion, the God who offers himself as example and model for all human behavior. But there is more. Becoming like the heavenly Father is not just one important aspect of Jesus’ teaching, it is the very heart of his message. The radical quality of Jesus’ words and the seeming impossibility of his demands

are quite obvious when heard as part of a general call to become and to be true sons and daughters of God. As long as we belong to this world, we will remain subject to its competitive ways and expect to be rewarded for all the good we do. But when we belong to God, who loves us without conditions, we can live as God does. The great conversion called for by Jesus is to move from belonging to the world to belonging to God.

*God, help me imitate your compassion in all my actions.*

MONDAY, WEEK 4

## DEEPER INTO THE HEART OF GOD

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

Do not discount what you have already accomplished. You have made important steps toward the freedom you are searching for. You have decided to dedicate yourself completely to God, to make Jesus the center of your life and to be fashioned into an instrument of God’s grace. Yes, you still experience your inner dividedness, your need for



approval and acclaim. But you see that you have made important choices that show where you want to go. You can look at your life as a large cone that becomes narrower the deeper you go. There are many doors in that cone that give you chances to leave the journey. But you have been closing these doors one after the other, making yourself go deeper

and deeper into your center. You know that Jesus is waiting for you at the end, just as you know that he is guiding you as you move in that direction. Every time you close another door—be it the door of immediate satisfaction, the door of distracting entertainment, the door of busyness, the door of guilt and worry, or the door of self-rejection—you commit yourself to go deeper into your heart and thus deeper into the heart of God.

*Jesus, help me close any doors that lead away from you.*

TUESDAY, WEEK 4

## BECOME A LIVING CHRIST

*“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” (Galatians 2:19-20)*

The spiritual life is a life guided by the same Spirit who guided Jesus Christ. The Spirit is the breath of Christ in us, the divine power of Christ active in us, the mysterious source of new vitality by which we are made aware that it is not we who live, but Christ who lives in us. Indeed, to live a spiritual life means to become living Christs. It is not enough to try to imitate Christ as much as possible, to remind others of Jesus, to be inspired by the words and actions of Jesus. No, the spiritual life presents us with a far more radical demand: to be living Christs here and now, in time and history. We will never come to know our true vocation in life unless we are willing to grapple with the radical claim the gospel places on us. Regardless of the particular shape we give to our lives, Jesus’ call to discipleship is primal, all-encompassing, all-inclusive, demanding a total commitment. One cannot be a little bit for Christ, give him some attention, or make him one of many concerns. Is it possible to follow Christ while fulfilling the demands of the world, to listen to Christ while paying equal attention to others, to carry Christ’s cross while carrying many other burdens as well?

*Jesus, help me imitate you in my daily life.*

WEDNESDAY, WEEK 4

## RETURNING TO GOD’S FAITHFULNESS

*“I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.” (Jeremiah 31:3)*

Through human history, God’s faithfulness is shown to us in God’s increasing desire for intimacy. At first God was the God for us, our protector and shield. Then, when Jesus came, God became the God with us, our companion and friend. Finally, when Jesus sent his Spirit, God was revealed to us as the God within us, our very breath and heartbeat. Our life is full of brokenness—broken relationships, broken promises, broken expectations. How can we live that brokenness without becoming bitter and resentful except by returning again and again to God’s faithful presence in our lives? Without this “place”

of return, our journey easily leads us to darkness and despair. But with this safe and solid home, we can keep renewing our faith, and keep trusting that the many setbacks of life move us forward to an always greater bond with the God of the covenant.

*O God, come to dwell in me today to mend and heal my brokenness so that...*

THURSDAY, WEEK 4

## THE GATEWAY TO JOY

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

The deep truth is that our human suffering need not be an obstacle to the joy and peace we so desire, but can become, instead, the means to it. The great secret of the spiritual life, the life of the Beloved Sons and Daughters of God, is that everything we live, be it gladness or sadness, joy or pain, health or illness, can all be part of the journey toward the full realization of our humanity. It is not hard to say to one another: “All that is good and beautiful leads us to the glory of the children of God.” But it is very hard to say: “But didn’t you know that we all have to suffer and thus enter into our glory?” Nonetheless, real care means the willingness to help each other in making our brokenness into the gateway to joy.



*Jesus, help me accept my brokenness as the way to find you,  
especially today in...*

FRIDAY, WEEK 4

## SHARING IN CHRIST’S DEATH

*“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)*

Jesus, how often have I missed the spiritual fruits of this season without even being aware of it? But how can I ever really celebrate Easter without observing Lent? How can I rejoice fully in your resurrection when I have avoided participating in your death? Yes, Lord, I

have to die with you, through you and in you and thus become ready to recognize you when you appear to me in your resurrection. There is so much in me that needs to die: false attachments, greed and anger, impatience and stinginess. O Lord, I am self-centered, concerned about myself, my career, my future, my name and fame. Often I even feel that I use you for my own advantage. How preposterous, how sacrilegious, how sad!

*Jesus, help me understand what keeps me from loving you.*

SATURDAY, WEEK 4

## DO WHAT THE GOSPEL SAYS

*“Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”*

*(James 1:22)*

We have to be a sign, a witness. I can have wonderful ideas, but finally people are going to look at how I’m living. Each individual Christian and each community of Christians has a unique call. Everybody can’t do everything. You get out and do what the gospel is saying. There are some people who go to minister in prison, who develop a whole nonviolent strategy around that. There are people who live very simple lives of prayer. Some live in monasteries, some as hermits, some in families. There are doctors and lawyers who live as witnesses. There are people who use their wealth to bring about things that otherwise wouldn’t be possible. We have to get in touch with what is our unique vocation, to be a sign of hope in the world.

*Jesus, help me discover how I can be a sign of hope for others.*

5TH SUNDAY OF LENT

## COMPASSION AND GRATITUDE

*“Bless the God of all, who everywhere works great wonders, who fosters our growth from birth, and deals with us according to his mercy.”*

*(Sirach 50:22)*

Ministry happens when you participate in the mystery of being with. The whole incarnation, God-with-us, Emmanuel, is first of all being with people. Caring means “to cry out with.” Compassion literally means “to be with those who suffer.” Ministry means we are

to be precisely where people are vulnerable, not to fix it or to change it. That is an unintended fruit of it, but that is not why you are there. Jesus is first of all God-with-us. For thirty years he was just living in a small village, living the same life that we live. It was only for three years that he was preaching. So even when you look at it in a spiritual way, Jesus' ministry wasn't just the three years he was preaching. The mystery is that he shared our lives. Ministry is being with the sick, the dying, being with people wherever they are, whatever their problems. We dare to be with them in their weakness and trust that if we are entering into people's vulnerable places, we will experience immense joy. That is the mystery of ministry. You can't solve the world's problems, but you can be with people.

*Jesus, help me be with others as completely as you were.*

MONDAY, WEEK 5

## MARY THE MODEL DISCIPLE

*"Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'" (Luke 1:38)*

God chose to take flesh in Mary who had found favor in God's eyes and had responded to that favor with a full "yes." Her response was not only an initial agreement but a lifelong obedience to God's redemptive presence. In this obedience she followed Jesus in the most perfect way. Her life was an always fuller abandonment to the divine will, a total emptying out in faith, a full entering into the darkness of her Son's death. There is no other human being in whom we can see so fully what it means to receive God's love. She has known more blessing and more suffering than anyone else in all humanity. In her we see most fully what it means to be redeemed. She constantly keeps before us that most intimate relationship with her Son. Her complete obedience, radical humility and unwavering faithfulness show us what a life of following Jesus truly can be.



*Jesus, help me say "yes" and follow you like Mary did.*

TUESDAY, WEEK 5

## DWELLING IN GOD'S PRESENCE

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

If there is any focus that the Christian leader of the future will need, it is the discipline of dwelling in the presence of the One who keeps asking us, "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?" It is the discipline of contemplative prayer. Through contemplative prayer we can keep ourselves from being pulled from one urgent issue to another and from becoming strangers to our own and God's heart. Contemplative prayer keeps us home, rooted and safe, even when we are on the road, moving from place to place, and often surrounded by sounds of violence and war. Contemplative prayer deepens in us the knowledge that we are already free, that we have already found a place to dwell, that we already belong to God, even though everything and everyone around us keeps suggesting the opposite.



*God, help me know that I belong to you because you love me.*

WEDNESDAY, WEEK 5

## CHOOSE LOVE

*"Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name." (Psalm 86:11)*

The knowledge of being loved in an unconditional way, before the world presents us with its conditions, cannot come from books, lectures, television programs or workshops. This spiritual knowledge comes from people who witness to God's love for us through their words and deeds. These people can be close to us, but they can also live far away or may even have lived long ago. Their witness announces the truth of God's love and calls us to act in accordance with it. How can we choose love when we have experienced so little of it? We choose love by taking small steps of love every time there is an opportunity. A smile, a handshake, a word of encouragement, a phone call, a card, an embrace, a kind greeting, a gesture of support, a moment of attention,

a helping hand, a present, a financial contribution, a visit—all these are little steps toward love.

Each step is like a candle burning in the night. It does not take the darkness away, but it guides us through the darkness.

*Jesus, help me to take some little steps toward love.*

THURSDAY, WEEK 5

## WE ARE ALL GOD'S BELOVED

*“Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” (1 John 4:20)*

Quite often out of an intimate encounter with God encounters with other human beings become possible. If you are the beloved of God, if you start thinking about other people's lives, you start realizing that they are as beloved as you are. One of the profound experiences of the spiritual life is that when you discover yourself as being the beloved son or daughter of God, you suddenly have new eyes to see the belovedness of other people. It is very interesting because it is the opposite of what happens in the world when they say you are very special, that means you are not the same as the rest. If you win an award and they say you are different than others, then that award is valuable because not everybody gets that award. The world is saying that you are only the best when not everybody else is the best.



*Jesus, help me recognize your presence in each person I meet.*

FRIDAY, WEEK 5

## EVERYTHING IS NEW

*“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17)*

The converted person does not say that nothing matters any more, but that everything that is happens in God and that God is the dwelling place where we come to know the true order of things. Instead of saying: “Nothing matters any more, since I know that God exists,” the



converted person says: “All is now clothed in divine light and therefore nothing can be unimportant.” Converted persons see, hear, and understand with a divine eye, a divine ear, a divine heart. Converted persons know themselves and all the world in God. Converted persons are where God is, and from that place everything matters: giving water, clothing the naked, working for a new world order, saying a prayer, smiling at a child, reading a book, and sleeping in peace. All has become different while all remains the same.

*Jesus, help me see things as you do and act as you would.*

SATURDAY, WEEK 5

## JESUS' SUFFERING IS STILL HAPPENING

*“May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”*

*(Galatians 6:14)*

Jesus, you once were condemned; you are still being condemned. You once carried your cross; you are still carrying your cross. You once died; you are dying still. You once rose from the dead; you are still rising from the dead. I look at you, and you open my eyes to the way in which your passion, death and resurrection are happening among us every day. But within me there is a deep fear of looking at my own world. You say to me: “Do not be afraid to look, to touch, to heal, to comfort and to console.” I listen to your voice, and, as I enter more deeply into the painful, but also hope-filled, lives of my fellow human beings, I know that I enter more deeply into your heart. As your passion, death and resurrection continue in history, give me the hope, the courage and the confidence to let your heart unite my heart with the hearts of all your suffering people, and so become for us the divine source of new life.



*Jesus, help me see you in those who are suffering around me.*

## DISCIPLE OR EXECUTIONER?

*“Pilate said to the crowd, ‘Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?’ All of them said, ‘Let him be crucified!’” (Matthew 27:22)*

Passion is a kind of waiting—waiting for what other people are going to do. Jesus went to Jerusalem to announce the good news to the people of that city. And he knew that he was going to put a choice before them: Will you be my disciple or my executioner? There is no



middle ground here. Jesus went to Jerusalem to put people in a situation where they had to say “Yes” or “No.” That is the great drama of Jesus’ passion: he had to wait for their response. What would they do? Betray him or follow him? In a way, his agony is not simply the agony of approaching death. It is also the agony of being out of control and of having to

wait. It is the agony of a God who depends on us to decide how to live out the divine presence among us. It is the agony of the God who, in a very mysterious way, allows us to decide how God will be God. Here we glimpse the mystery of God’s incarnation. God became human not only to act among us but also to be the recipient of our responses.

*Jesus, help me follow you through suffering into new life.*

MONDAY HOLY WEEK

## NOTICING HIDDEN SUFFERING

*“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it. You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” (1 Corinthians 12:26-27)*

Can we be compassionate to those whose suffering remains hidden from the eyes of the world? There is much hidden suffering: the suffering of the teenager who does not feel secure; the suffering of the husband and wife who feel that there is no love left between them; the suffering of the wealthy executive who thinks that people are more interested in his money than in him; the suffering of the gay man or woman who feels isolated from family and friends; the suffering of the countless people who lack caring friends, satisfying work, a peaceful home, a safe neighborhood; the suffering of millions who feel lonely

and wonder if life is worth living. Once we look downward instead of upward on the ladder of life, we see the pain of people wherever we go, and we hear the call of compassion wherever we are.

*Jesus, help me notice those suffering and in need.*

TUESDAY HOLY WEEK

## LET GOD LEAD YOU

*“When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.”*

*(John 21:18)*

The world proposes that in our youth we are dependent and others tell us what to do, while as older adults we can go our own way, be independent and do what we want. Jesus, however, invites us to a new way, the opposite of this shallow way of living. He is saying, “When you were young in the spiritual life you were in control and made your choices about what you believed or did not believe. But when you grow older and more mature spiritually, you are to allow those around you to gird you and lead you where you rather would not go!” Jesus’ path leads toward an intimacy with the Divine that supports the growth of faithful, unconditional love in our primary relationships, as well as growth in respectful care for those beyond our inner circles with whom we are interrelated in the human family. Relinquishing the need to control and dominate family members, colleagues, and friends is how Jesus lovingly challenges us, saying, “Give up shaping and controlling events and people, and be willing to be girded and led.”



*Jesus, help me go where you lead even if it is hard.*

WEDNESDAY HOLY WEEK

## HE MUST BE HANDED OVER

*“The Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” (Luke 24:7)*

The central word in the story of Jesus’ arrest is one I never thought much about. It is “to be handed over.” That is what happened in Gethsemane. Jesus was handed over. Some translations say that Jesus was “betrayed,” but the Greek says, “to be handed over.” Judas handed



Jesus over (see Mark 14:10). But the remarkable thing is that the same word is used not only for Judas but also for God. God did not spare Jesus, but handed him over to benefit us all (Romans 8:32). So this term “to be handed over” plays a central role in the life of Jesus. Indeed, this drama of being handed over divides the life of Jesus radically in two.

The first part of Jesus’ life is filled with activity. Jesus takes all sorts of initiatives. He speaks; he preaches; he heals; he travels. But immediately after Jesus is handed over, he becomes the one to whom things are being done. He’s being arrested; he’s being led to the high priest; he’s being taken before Pilate; he’s being crowned with thorns; he’s being nailed on a cross. Things are being done to him over which he has no control. That is the meaning of passion—being the recipient of other people’s actions.

*Jesus, help me respond lovingly to what others are doing to me.*

HOLY THURSDAY

## JESUS’ NEW COVENANT

*“This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”  
(Luke 22:20)*

The immense suffering of humanity can easily be understood as a sign of God’s wrath, as a punishment. People say “How can there be a loving God when all this is happening? It must be a cruel, spiteful God who allows human beings to suffer so much!” Jesus, however, took upon himself all this suffering and lifted it up on the cross, not as a curse but as a blessing. He made the cup of God’s wrath into a cup of

blessings. That's the mystery of the Eucharist. Jesus died for us so that we may live. He poured out his blood for us so that we may find new life. He gave himself away for us, so that we can live in community. He became for us food and drink so that we can be fed for everlasting life. The Eucharist is that sacred mystery through which what we lived as a curse, we now live as a blessing. Our suffering can no longer be a divine punishment. Jesus transformed it as the way to new life. His blood, and ours too, now can become martyr's blood—blood that witnesses to a new covenant, a new communion, a new community.

*Jesus, help me not to resist your love and so share your life.*

GOOD FRIDAY

## THE MYSTERY OF JESUS' PASSION

*“Jesus said, ‘It is finished.’ Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”*  
*(John 19:30)*

When Jesus says, “It is finished” he does not simply mean, “I have done all the things I wanted to do.” He also means, “I have allowed things to be done to me that needed to be done to me in order for me to fulfill my vocation.” Jesus does not fulfill his vocation in action only, but also in passion. He doesn't fulfill his vocation just by doing the things the Father sent him to do, but also by letting things be done to him. All action ends in passion. When we are handed over, we wait to be acted upon. This is the mystery of work, the mystery of love, the mystery of friendship, the mystery of community—they always involve being acted upon. And that is the mystery of Jesus' love. Jesus in his passion is the one who waits for our response. Precisely in that waiting the intensity of his love and God's love is revealed to us. If we were forced to love Jesus and to respond to him only as he ordered, we would not really be lovers.



*Jesus, help me discover God's love in everything that happens.*

HOLY SATURDAY

## THE END OF OUR JOURNEY

*“Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20)*

A little journey has come to its end. I realize that all I learned, I knew already. But all I learned was also new. My only hope was to make Jesus more fully the center of my life, the heart of my heart, the lover of my soul, the bridegroom of my spirit. He was always there, in a soft, gentle, hidden way. Yet he is there now as though he had never been there. He is always the same and never the same, always absent, always present, always searched for, always found. That’s what God’s love is about. The Lover and the Beloved are two and yet one, separated and yet in full communion, in anguish yet filled with ecstatic joy. I caught a glimpse of it again. Something new has begun; nothing can be predicted. Yet all is already held safe in the divine embrace that holds me, too.



*God, help me continue to draw nearer to you each day through Jesus  
and with the help of the Holy Spirit.*

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EASTER SUNDAY

## DEATH HAS LOST ITS FEARFUL POWER

*“Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:54-55)*

“Christ is risen” means that guilt, loneliness, hunger, poverty, war and devastation no longer have the last word. Death and all its symptoms in our individual and communal lives are not the final reality any more. This has been stated many times in many ways, but one of our greatest challenges is to affirm it in our concrete life situation. The constant temptation is to experience a concrete appearance of the power of death as too much to resist and look beyond. Depression, resentment, revenge and hatred are all forms of surrender to the power of death and signs of our inability to see that, in and through Christ, death has lost its final power. That is precisely what the Christ event is all about. Our Lord who died on the cross has overcome death, has conquered the evil one, and has triumphed over the powers of this world. There is no power of death, not even a nuclear holocaust, that has not been conquered in the resurrection of Christ.

*Jesus, help me trust in you and your new life in me.*

