

40 DAYS TO PEACE & UNION WITH GOD

Daily Mental Prayer Through THE BETTER PART

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INTRODUCTION

Authentic Christian prayer is nothing less than a conversation with God—with the One who created us in love and for love. It is an ongoing interaction that gives us a chance to know God better and provides God the invitation He desires to touch our souls with His healing grace. That’s the real source of inner strength and wisdom, which we need so that we can find and follow God’s plan for our lives. And following His plan is the only way to find lasting peace and union with God, both here on earth and in heaven.

The challenge we all face is that our lives are so noisy that this communion with God easily breaks down or falls to the wayside. This is why we created this forty-day challenge to deeper prayer, peace and union with God. When you pray with *40 Days to Peace & Union with God*, you are committing to do your part, and if you do your part, God is faithful, and you can be assured that He will do His. As the Bible says, “Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you.” (James 4:8)

Christians who take their faith seriously pray. Authentic disciples of Jesus pray. Their typical days, weeks, months, and years are seasoned with prayer: traditional prayers, liturgical prayers, spontaneous prayers, the rosary. They make prayer commitments, giving structure and consistency to their faith journey. These commitments and this dedication to prayer and relationship with God keeps Christians united to the Vine, so their lives can bear the fruit both they and Christ long for.

Among the most foundational and powerful prayer commitments is one that can have more bearing on your life than any other, because it is more personalized: **daily mental prayer**. There is no saint in heaven that has failed to daily draw near to Jesus with this kind of prayer. Mental prayer is the prayer of saints—but it is not beyond those who desire to become saints. Instead, it is the pathway to our high-calling to become saints. It is the way that Jesus leads us to union with Him and to finding peace, passion, and purpose in life.

No book can pray for you. No book can teach you to pray. At most, a book can be a useful tool to lead you to prayer as a new discipline, or deeper into prayer if you are already a practiced dedicated friend of Jesus. *40 Days to Peace & Union with God* is designed to help you engage more actively in the quest of daily mental prayer so you can reap more fruits of spiritual growth.

It will help you in several key ways. First, it provides a simple structure for prayer that some may not yet have in place. Second, it provides daily inspirations that can and will stir the thirsty heart to prayer. Finally, it provides a connection to thousands of others who will join in this beautiful symphony of love lifted by the hearts of God's people—by *your heart*—to His eternal praise in heaven.

We have no doubt that if you give your heart to this challenge you will never be the same and will better know the peace and presence of God in your life. Now, let's dive in to a simple but powerful approach to prayer and this forty-day adventure into grace.

We suspect that was a lot simpler than you may have anticipated. There is no doubt you can do this!

Beyond this basic approach, there are a few more secrets that you might want to consider to help you to succeed during these forty days and beyond:

Sacred Time: It is very powerful and helpful to make a commitment to God regarding the time you will give to him in prayer each day. Simply determine what time each day and how much time you will give to this prayer commitment. As you can see it is very brief so ten minutes should be more than enough. The key is to try to show up at the same time every day so that your body becomes your friend as you build or deepen your habit of prayer. Once you decide the time and the duration, then simply tell the Lord your commitment and ask for his help so that you can fulfill your promise.

Sacred Space: It can be very helpful to set aside a special place where you will pray each day. You can use your favorite icon, holy card, crucifix or whatever helps you to focus your heart and mind on God. Coupled with your sacred time, this space will provide helpful motivation, rhythm and encouragement to pray, especially when you have those tough days when your motivation might not be as strong.

Just Show Up: No matter how you feel, how well you pray, or even whether you are able to stay awake or not! God will honor your presence whenever you simply do your best to draw near to him. He will never fail to keep his end of the promise and will even make up for your lack of ability to pray. He makes this promise in Romans chapter eight where he says that when we come to pray but struggle, he will pray in us! What an amazing gift. So, on the worst days we just need to show up and he will take care of the resist.

No Condemnation: Saints know that the perfect can often get in the way of the

good for people who have a deep desire to honor God. We can't let our perfectionism or self-condemnation get in the way of our relationship with God. If we fail to show up when we should because we were up too late the night before, we just ask for forgiveness, reaffirm our commitment, and move forward. As the father of the prodigal son, he is always looking for us to return and ready to receive us when we do.

YOUR THREE-STEP GUIDE TO DAILY MENTAL PRAYER...

READY

Find a quiet place. Turn off your phone, computer, everything. Close your eyes, or look at something beautiful from nature or religious art. Remind yourself that God is with you, within you, or right beside you, eager to have this conversation with you.

SET

THANK God for a blessing that He has given you. It could be a little or a big one, from yesterday or from a long time ago

ASK God for something that you or someone you care about really needs.

OPEN your heart to hear His Word: *"Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."* (1 Samuel 3:10)

GO

READ today's Gospel passage from the Bible. The Bible is God's inspired Word; it is one of the most powerful ways He speaks to us in the conversation of prayer.

REFLECT on what it means, what scripture tells you about God and God's vision for your life. You may want to write your own daily reflections down. Start the day allowing your conversation to flow into your journal. Then, bring His work and your conversation into your day. Remind yourself to be aware of His presence.

RESPOND in your heart by first resting in the Lord's encouragement and then talking to Him about what struck you most. This might mean praising God for His goodness and power, expressing sorrow for your own sins, thanking Him for blessings, or asking Him for grace. You may finish with the suggested final prayer or your own prayer, but be sure

to **mean** what you say as you pray it. Remember, this is a **conversation** with God.

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:

where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

to be consoled as to console,

to be understood as to understand,

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.



ASH WEDNESDAY

THE SECRET RENDEZVOUS (MT 6:1-6, 16-18)

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"But there is another and interior way of praying without ceasing, and that is the way of desire. Whatever else you are doing, if you long for that Sabbath, you are not ceasing to pray. If you do not want to cease praying, do not cease longing.

Your unceasing desire is your unceasing voice." ~ST. AUGUSTINE

READ: MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-18

“Be careful not to parade your good deeds before men to attract their notice; by doing this you will lose all reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give alms, do not have it trumpeted before you; this is what the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win men’s admiration. I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward. But when you give alms, your left hand must not know what your right is doing; your almsgiving must be secret, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not imitate the hypocrites: they love to say their prayers standing up in the synagogues and at the street corners for people to see them; I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward. But when you pray, go to your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you... When you fast do not put on a gloomy look as the hypocrites do: they pull long faces to let men know they are fasting. I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that no one will know you are fasting except your Father who sees all that is done in secret; and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.”

REFLECT

Hidden behind this sobering lesson against the temptation of hypocrisy is a beautiful revelation of the heart of Christ. He points out that he sees “what is done in secret.” He repeats this three times. He has seen all of the most selfish, vitriolic, and morose chapters of each of our ongoing interior monologues...everything. He knows it all. And yet, he still loves us with the tender love of the perfect father, the perfect friend. If this doesn't prove what unconditional love really is, nothing does.

But it doesn't stop there. He actually wants us to let him into that monologue, to turn it into an ongoing dialogue, a conversation with him. He wants to take part in everything we do; he wants to be our closest companion, our most intimate friend. And why? Because he has some psychological need that we can pacify for him? No. Just the opposite. Because he has more he wants to give us. He has a reward to give each one of us, the reward of our true name (cf. Rev 2:17), our fulfillment, the satisfaction of our deepest yearnings—most of all, he wants to give us himself, now and for all eternity.

RESPOND

You see all my motives and intentions, but I think sometimes I try to hide from them. Show them to me, Lord. I don't want anything to get in the way of our friendship. I don't want to fall into hypocrisy. I want to do all things out of a humble, sincere love for you. With the humility of your heart, Lord, shape my heart...

At times life seems so complicated...but you simplify it. Stay with me, Lord; walk with me; teach me how to love you, to love my neighbor, and to master my own selfish tendencies. With the silence of your heart, speak to my heart...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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CROSSES WITH CHRIST (LK 9:18–27)

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“The only petition I would have you put forward on my behalf is that I may be given sufficient inward and outward strength to be as resolute in will as in words, and a Christian in reality instead of only in repute.” ~ST. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

READ: LUKE 9:18–27

Now one day when he was praying alone in the presence of his disciples he put this question to them, “Who do the crowds say I am?” And they answered, “John the Baptist; others Elijah; and others say one of the ancient prophets come back to life.” “But you,” he said, “who do you say I am?” It was Peter who spoke up. “The Christ of God,” he said. But he gave them strict orders not to tell anyone anything about this. “The Son of Man,” he said, “is destined to suffer grievously, to be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes and to be put to death, and to be raised up on the third day.” Then to all he said, “If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross every day and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, that man will save it. What gain, then, is it for a man to have won the whole world and to have lost or ruined his very self? For if anyone is ashamed of me and of my words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his own glory and in the glory of the Father and the holy angels. I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.”

REFLECT

True friends tell friends the hard truth; flatterers don't. In this intimate exchange with his

chosen disciples, Jesus looks them in the eye and tells them a very hard truth—that their lives will only take on real meaning if they are willing to sacrifice whatever is necessary (dreams, hopes, comfort, plans) in order to follow him. If we don't take the time to learn this lesson, we run the risk of discarding our friendship with Christ when it starts to cost us. Jesus warns us that if we are ashamed of him and our identification with him, if we prefer acceptance by the world and worldly success to being a faithful Christian, then we may, tragically, end up with what we have preferred. In the end, Christ's Kingdom will come in all its glory (now in the Church it is still in embryonic form), and our allegiance to him in spite of suffering and rejection will prove to have been, as he promises us, the wiser course. If Christ had not traveled that path ahead of us, climbing the hill of Calvary and dying on a cross, it would be hard to believe him. But he has, and so it shouldn't be that hard after all.

RESPOND

And if you were to ask me this question, "Who do you say I am?" how would I answer? I would say the right words: you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the Lord of life and history. But I think you would keep looking at me, because you see beyond words into my heart. And in my heart, Lord, I have still not surrendered completely to your love. Lord Jesus, help me...

What are you asking of me, Lord? Okay, I give it to you. I will follow where you lead. If you went to Calvary for me, I will go there for you. Help me to see everything with faith. If I know it's your will, I can embrace it, but my faith is sometimes so weak that I forget to look for your hand in the circumstances and responsibilities of my life. Lord, increase my faith...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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NEW WINE AT THE WEDDING (MT 9:14–15)

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"God's splendor is the source of life, those who see him share his life. Because he was beyond the reach of man's mind, incomprehensible and invisible, he made himself visible, intelligible and knowable so that those who see and accept him may POSSESS LIFE." ~St. Irenaeus

READ: MATTHEW 9:14–17

Then John's disciples came to him and said, "Why is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not?" Jesus replied, "Surely the bridegroom's attendants would never think of mourning as long as the bridegroom is still with them? But the time will come for the bridegroom to be taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on to an old cloak, because the patch pulls away from the cloak and the tear gets worse. Nor do people put new wine into old wineskins; if they do, the skins burst, the wine runs out, and the skins are lost. No; they put new wine into fresh skins and both are preserved."

REFLECT

Jesus wants to come into your life because he wants you to share his joy. He calls his disciples his "wedding guests." The Greek term literally means "children of the bridal chamber," a phrase that referred to those special guests who were the bridegroom's best friends, the ones who spent the weeklong wedding reception (the ancient Palestinian alternative to modern-day honeymoons) at his side, sharing his joy and celebrating with him. Jesus wants your friendship, and he wants it to deepen, so that the indescribable joy that overflows from his love can spill into your life and the lives of those around

you. He only needs you to say one thing to make it happen—but he needs you to say it over and over: “Jesus, thy will be done.”

RESPOND

I know, Lord, that a sad saint is a bad saint. You are a God of joy. I long for true joy, the kind that lasts even in the midst of suffering, because it is grounded in your love, a love that never tires. I believe in your love, Jesus, but I still need you to teach me how to live in its light. You are the bridegroom of my heart. Teach me the way to go; show me the path to follow... Sometimes I am afraid of what you may ask me. I hesitate to follow you, like John the Baptist’s disciples. Why, Lord? Enlighten me. Your will is full of wisdom. Give me the courage to be wise...

You guide all of history—you prepared the world for the Incarnation, and now you spread your grace slowly but surely through the work of your Church. Thank you for your presence, your forgiveness, and your grace. I want to build your Church, to be a healthy cell in the Body of Christ. Make use of me, Lord. With you I can do all things...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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MAKING ALL THINGS NEW (LK 5:27–32)

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“As the tree is known by its fruits, so they who claim to belong to Christ are known by their actions; for this work of ours does not consist in just making professions, but in a faith that is both practical and lasting.”

~ST. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

READ: LUKE 5:27–39

When he went out after this, he noticed a tax collector, Levi by name, sitting by the customs house, and said to him, “Follow me.” And leaving everything he got up and followed him. In his honour Levi held a great reception in his house, and with them at table was a large gathering of tax collectors and others. The Pharisees and their scribes complained to his disciples and said, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus said to them in reply, “It is not those who are well who need the doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the virtuous, but sinners to repentance.” They then said to him, “John’s disciples are always fasting and saying prayers, and the disciples of the Pharisees too, but yours go on eating and drinking.” Jesus replied, “Surely you cannot make the bridegroom’s attendants fast while the bridegroom is still with them? But the time will come, the time for the bridegroom to be taken away from them; that will be the time when they will fast.” He also told them this parable, “No one tears a piece from a new cloak to put it on an old cloak; if he does, not only will he have torn the new one, but the piece taken from the new will not match the old. And nobody puts new wine into old skins; if he does, the new wine will burst the skins and then run out, and the skins will be lost. No; new wine must be put into fresh skins. And nobody who has been drinking old wine wants new. The old is good,” he says.

REFLECT

St. Luke paints a vivid picture of the encounter between Jesus and Levi. Jesus is walking downtown, probably with his disciples, and sees Levi there at his office. Luke says that Jesus “noticed a tax collector, Levi by name.” Isn’t it just like Jesus to notice someone—what a torrent of instruction rushes out of that one little verb! It means that the Lord is always on the lookout. It means that Jesus is thinking not of himself, but of us and of our needs. It means that Jesus recognizes the needs and desires and yearnings of our hearts. Jesus notices this unhappy tax collector, a social pariah, and calls him, renews his life, and gives him a mission and a meaning.

That’s what Jesus does. He is the doctor of every soul; he detects our every need and hope, and he prescribes the perfect medicine. He is the bridegroom of every heart; he gazes on us with personal, determined love and leads us into the everlasting adventure of indescribable intimacy and communion with God. Jesus is a friend, true—but what a friend he is, and what great friends he teaches us to be!

RESPOND

Lord, sometimes I wonder why you keep asking me for more, why you keep sending me more crosses, more missions. Why can’t we relax and take it easy? I know the answer: because you love me too much, and you love every person too much—you suffered and died to win us grace, and you want that grace to fill us and lead us to true meaning and lasting happiness. Lord Jesus, I trust in you...

I remember the first time I heard your voice in my heart. I was like Levi, living an average life, wanting more but not knowing where to find it. And you noticed me. You notice me every day, every moment. Give me a heart like yours, one that responds like Levi to your every wish, and in turn reaches out to others as you have reached out to me. Teach me, Lord...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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WHAT PLEASES GOD (MK 1:12–15)

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“Jesus came to John, and received baptism at his hands. Could anything be more wonderful? The boundless river that gladdens the City of God is washed by a few drops of water. The source without limits that engenders life for all mankind and is beyond all understanding is covered by the poor waters OF THIS WORLD.” ~St. Hippolytus

READ: MARK 1:7–13

In the course of his [St. John the Baptist’s] preaching he said, “Someone is following me, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to kneel down and undo the strap of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” It was at this time that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. No sooner had he come up out of the water than he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit, like a dove, descending on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; my favor rests on you.” Immediately afterwards the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness and he remained there for forty days, and was tempted by Satan. He was with the wild beasts, and the angels looked after him.

REFLECT

Jesus did not need to be baptized. He had not sinned, and baptism was a sign of repenting from sin. Yet he chose to be baptized anyway. It is the recurring theme of his life. He didn’t have to come to earth at all; he didn’t have to suffer and die on the Cross. He didn’t have to leave us his real presence in the Eucharist, his Holy Spirit, and the Church to be our guide. In fact, he didn’t have to create us in the first place. But he

chose to do all these things, simply out of love. Everything God does is motivated by love—everything. He even willingly goes into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil for forty days, not because he needed to be purified (he was without sin), but because he wanted to share our lot as wholly as possible. He is the Friend without compare, because he is completely unselfish, and therefore totally trustworthy.

RESPOND

Thank you for not overpowering me. You are meek and humble of heart. You are close to me, guiding me, entering into my daily life so calmly, so unexpectedly. Keep me tuned in to your action in my life, so I can always welcome and obey you, just as John the Baptist did...

If you had refused to come and save me, I would never have discovered the meaning of life. But because of you I know it: I was created to love God and experience his love for me. All I need to do in life is seek and heed your will for me, in big things and little things. Thank you, Lord, for coming to enlighten and strengthen me. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done!

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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CHRISTIAN ROCK (MT 16:13–19)

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“Love for the Roman Pontiff must be in us a delightful passion, for in him we see Christ.” ~ST. JOSÉ MARÍA ESCRIVÁ

READ: MATTHEW 16:13–20

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi he put this question to his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say he is John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “But you,” he said, “who do you say I am?” Then Simon Peter spoke up, “You are the Christ,” he said, “the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Simon son of Jonah, you are a happy man! Because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. So I now say to you: You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven: whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven.” Then he gave the disciples strict orders not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

REFLECT

Friends are people you can count on. We can count on Christ. He promises that the gates of the underworld (the gates of hell, the powers of the devil) will not prevail against the ferocious assaults of his Church. In other words, his team will win; his Kingdom will stand—both in our hearts and in the world. If we follow Christ, if we stay faithful to him, we will share in his victory; we can count on it. The history of the Church confirms it. Scandals, heresies, wars, slander, and seduction have all tried to halt her advance—to no avail. In every age her voice rings out in defense of human freedom and

the truth of Jesus Christ. In every epoch she renews the human race with saints whose divine love sets the world ablaze. In every era she widens the scope of her saving action. We can count on Christ, but can he count on us?

JESUS: *I knew that you would need a firm point of reference as you travel through life. I knew that you would need a rock to hang on to when fashionable trends and apparently reasonable cultural options tried to sweep you away. This is why I left you my vicar on earth, the pope. Follow his teaching, because it is my teaching. Listen to him, because I want to guide you through him. If I hadn't left you a guide, you would be at the mercy of flippant fads. I want you to grow in wisdom and grace steadily, without interruptions, without going down dead-end detours, without suffering the damage inflicted by false philosophies and distorted theologies. Stay close to me, stay close to my vicar; I won't lead you astray...*

RESPOND

I believe that you are the Son of God, the Savior. I believe that you were sent by the Father to redeem me. You were sent to rescue me, to bring me into your Kingdom, your family, your heart. I believe in you, Lord; increase my faith. Never let me be separated from you and from your Church...

I get so used to your Church. I take so many of your gifts for granted. Help me to live less superficially. Enlighten my mind. I want to appreciate the teaching and guidance you offer me through the pope and the bishops, through your saints, and through the rich doctrine of the Church. I want to do my part to build up your Church. I love you, Lord, so how can I not love your Bride, for whom you died?...

I am no genius, Lord, but I want to be able to defend the truths of your doctrine, to be able to explain them. You are the one Lord, the one Savior. And so many people just don't know you! So many lies, so much misinformation and misunderstanding deceive them. Instruct me, teach me—help me do my homework, so that I can bear the torch of your transforming truth with elegance, respect, and gusto...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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PRAY LIKE A CHRISTIAN (MT 6:7–15)

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“Mindful then of our condition, that we are essentially limited and absolutely dependent on the Supreme Being, before everything else let us have recourse to prayer. We know through faith how great is the power of humble, trustful, persevering prayer.” ~POPE PIUS XI, CARITATE CHRISTI COMPULSI

READ: MATTHEW 6:7–15

“In your prayers do not babble as the pagans do, for they think that by using many words they will make themselves heard. Do not be like them; your Father knows what you need before you ask him. So you should pray like this: Our Father in heaven, may your name be held holy, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven those who are in debt to us. And do not put us to the test, but save us from the evil one.

“Yes, if you forgive others their failings, your heavenly Father will forgive you yours; but if you do not forgive others, your Father will not forgive your failings either.”

REFLECT

Friends share what they have with each other. Good friends freely share their most valuable possessions. By this standard, Christ’s friendship is in a class all by itself. He didn’t just share things, or knowledge, or companionship; he shared his nature as God’s Son—his divine nature.

In this prayer, he teaches us to call God “Father.” And to make sure we don’t think that’s just some pretty poetry, he also describes God as “your Father [who] knows what

you need..." In Christ, we have become not just citizens of God's Kingdom, but members of God's own family. We have Christ's blood flowing in our veins. We have an eternal inheritance, we have our own room in the heavenly mansion, our own family servant (our guardian angel), and the rest of the family is eagerly awaiting our arrival.

This is the core message of the entire New Testament: through our incorporation into Christ and through our friendship with him, we have become full members of God's household, along with everything that entails. Doesn't it make you want to pray the Our Father in a whole new way?

RESPOND

Thank you for the gift of prayer. I can always raise my mind and heart to you, no matter where I am or what I'm doing. Thank you for the prayers and prayer commitments that you have brought into my life. I want to pray them well. I want to seek and find you in prayer, not just go through the motions. Stir my heart, Lord; remind me that you are my loving Father. Lord, teach me to pray...

Thank you for your priceless gift of forgiveness, and for letting me experience that forgiveness so many times. I want to forgive as you forgive. You know who and what offends and hurts me most—and you permit those offenses and hurts. They give me opportunities to become more like you. Who do I need to forgive right now? Have mercy on me, Lord, and make me merciful...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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THE MOST PRECIOUS SECRET (LK 11:27-36)

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"Man has a noble task: that of prayer and love. To pray and to love, that is the happiness of man on earth." ~ST. JOHN VIANNEY

READ: LUKE 11:27-36

Now as he was speaking, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said, "Happy the womb that bore you and the breasts you sucked!" But he replied, "Still happier those who hear the word of God and keep it!" The crowds got even bigger and he addressed them, "This is a wicked generation; it is asking for a sign. The only sign it will be given is the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. On Judgement day the Queen of the South will rise up with the men of this generation and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and there is something greater than Solomon here. On Judgement day the men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation and condemn it, because when Jonah preached they repented; and there is something greater than Jonah here. No one lights a lamp and puts it in some hidden place or under a tub, but on the lamp-stand so that people may see the light when they come in. The lamp of your body is your eye. When your eye is sound, your whole body too is filled with light; but when it is diseased your body too will be all darkness. See to it then that the light inside you is not darkness. If, therefore, your whole body is filled with light, and no trace of darkness, it will be light entirely, as when the lamp shines on you with its rays."

REFLECT

It must have warmed Christ's heart to hear the cheer this woman let loose in the middle of his homily. She had detected his goodness and his beauty and couldn't hold back her

praise. What a contrast with the many self-righteous intellectuals who sneered at the humble rabbi from Nazareth! But Jesus doesn't luxuriate in the compliment. He seizes the opportunity to reveal the secret that mankind had been seeking since before history began: what makes for a happy life.

The human heart was made to find its true, lasting satisfaction only by living in communion with God, by knowing God and loving God—hearing and heeding God's word. The blessedness that comes from that outstrips even the most profound and worthy natural delights, like that of being a parent to a great and wise rabbi. Jesus came to once again make that kind of happiness possible. Whoever trusts in him, follows his teachings, and stays close to him will experience it, just as the example of his closest friend of all time—his mother Mary, whose moral and spiritual beauty he subtly complements in his response to the cheer—eloquently attests to.

RESPOND

When I take time to think about who you really are, Creator and Redeemer of all things, the infinite One, the all-powerful and all-loving and all-knowing God, I am filled with wonder. And to think that you want to walk with me, to guide my life. You suffered every kind of sorrow and humiliation in order to be able to prepare me a place in your Kingdom. Blessed be your name...

The pace of life often carries me away, and I forget to keep you in my sights. I have to admit, the seductions of pleasure, wealth, popularity, power—they still attract me. Part of me still reaches out to those things. But my eye, the eye of my soul, recognizes that only you and your will can give lasting meaning and fruitfulness. I want you, Lord. Teach me to do your will...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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IMAGINING GOD'S GOODNESS (MT. 7:7-14)

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"Teach me to seek you, and reveal yourself to me as I seek, because I can neither seek you if you do not teach me how, nor find you unless you reveal yourself." ~ST. ANSELM

READ: MATTHEW 7:7-14

“Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For the one who asks always receives; the one who searches always finds; the one who knocks will always have the door opened to him. Is there a man among you who would hand his son a stone when he asked for bread? Or would hand him a snake when he asked for a fish? If you, then, who are evil, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! So always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the meaning of the Law and the Prophets. Enter by the narrow gate, since the road that leads to perdition is wide and spacious, and many take it; but it is a narrow gate and a hard road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

REFLECT

Friendship cannot be forced, not even friendship with God. Since Christ wants us to relate to him as friends, not as zombies, he refuses to force us to follow him. He lets us seek happiness in the world's many empty wells and false promises, if we so choose. And yet, he wants us to look for it in him. Imagine how eagerly and energetically he pronounced this threefold command: "Ask! Seek! Knock!" It's as if he is pleading for us to turn to him, to let him be our guide and coach and Savior and friend. It's all his heart

wants. Why do so many refuse the invitation?

RESPOND

Certain things always remind me of your goodness: the beauties of nature, the crucifix, the love of my family... How many there are! Right now I want to contemplate them, to remember them... Strengthen my conviction, Lord, that you are the perfect Father who loves me even more than I love myself. Always remind me of your goodness, so I will never, ever walk away from you...

I believe in you, Lord, and so I believe you when you say that the meaning of life and the quality of my discipleship corresponds to the way I treat my neighbor in thought, word, and deed. And isn't that how you lived? Your whole life was one continuous act of self-giving that reached its climax on the cross. Teach me to give my whole self to you. Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart more like yours...

Whenever I have really asked/sought/knocked, you have always rewarded me with a new experience of your goodness. Why don't I ask more? Is it because I think I can give meaning and fruitfulness to my life all by myself? That is foolish, I know. But I am a fool, Lord. I need your wisdom and grace to transform me...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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THE HEART OF THE MATTER (MT 5:17–26)

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“The Christian life is the continuation and completion of the life of Christ in us. We should be so many Christs here on earth, continuing his life and his works, laboring and suffering... ” ~ST. JOHN EUDES

READ: MATTHEW 5:17–26

“Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete them. I tell you solemnly, till heaven and earth disappear, not one dot, not one little stroke, shall disappear from the Law until its purpose is achieved. Therefore, the man who infringes even one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be considered the least in the kingdom of heaven; but the man who keeps them and teaches them will be considered great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, if your virtue goes no deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven. ‘You have learnt how it was said to our ancestors: You must not kill; and if anyone does kill he must answer for it before the court. But I say this to you: anyone who is angry with his brother will answer for it before the court; if a man calls his brother Fool he will answer for it before the Sanhedrin; and if a man calls him Renegade he will answer for it in hell fire. So then, if you are bringing your offering to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and present your offering. Come to terms with your opponent in good time while you are still on the way to the court with him, or he may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the officer, and you will be thrown into prison. I tell you solemnly, you will not get out till you have paid the last penny.”

REFLECT

The Greek word Jesus uses for hell is “Gehenna.” Gehenna was Jerusalem’s garbage dump. It had been the valley where unfaithful Jews in past centuries offered human sacrifices to foreign gods. When the nation reformed and such practices were stopped, they decided to use Gehenna as an open-air incinerator. Thus, the ever-smoldering and worm-infested valley became a symbol for the place where people who reject friendship with God suffer eternal frustration: hell.

Christ’s frequent mention of hell in the Gospels has caused some critics to accuse Christianity of manipulating weak and superstitious people by instilling fear. Nothing could be less accurate. Christ’s warnings are those of a friend. If you were in the car with a friend and saw that he was about to collide with an oncoming eighteen-wheeler, you would try to get him to turn out of the way. Jesus knows that we can only reach lasting happiness through friendship with God, and he wants us to be happy, so he warns us about everything that could damage or destroy that friendship. The truth is that eternity spent without God will be indescribably painful, because the human person was created to live in union with God. Since Christ loves us, he tells us the truth—even the tough truth.

RESPOND

You care about what happens in my mind and my heart—where only you and I can see. Help me look there now; show me what is pleasing to you and what is not, and then change what is not. Please, Lord—you know I can’t do it on my own. You know how self-centered and wounded I am. If you don’t change my heart, it will never change. Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart more like yours...

Why do you give so much importance to such little things? A false promise here, a lustful fantasy there, an angry or spiteful word now and then... Lord, why don’t you teach us about political systems and economic justice—the big picture? Somehow, the little picture of each soul matters more to you. Make me wise, Lord; teach me to follow you...

Some aspects of your will are harder for me to follow than others. Some of the Church’s teachings I understand easily—others not so much. It doesn’t matter, Lord. What matters is that I know it comes from you, my Creator and Redeemer. I want to do your will, no matter how hard. Increase my weak faith; Jesus, I trust in you...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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GIVING LIKE GOD (MT. 5:38–48)

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“Finally, may Christ inflame the desires of all men to break through the barriers which divide them, to strengthen the bonds of mutual love, to learn to understand one another, and to pardon those who have done them wrong.”

~POPE JOHN XXIII, *PACEM IN TERRIS*

READ: MATTHEW 5:38–48

“You have learnt how it was said: Eye for eye and tooth for tooth. But I say this to you: offer the wicked man no resistance. On the contrary, if anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer him the other as well; if a man takes you to law and would have your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone orders you to go one mile, go two miles with him. Give to anyone who asks, and if anyone wants to borrow, do not turn away. You have learnt how it was said: You must love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say this to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; in this way, you will be sons of your Father in heaven, for he causes his sun to rise on bad men as well as good, and his rain to fall on honest and dishonest men alike. For if you love those who love you, what right have you to claim any credit? Even the tax collectors do as much, do they not? And if you save your greetings for your brothers, are you doing anything exceptional? Even the pagans do as much, do they not? You must therefore be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

REFLECT

God makes the sun shine and the rain come down on both his faithful children and the rebellious ones. His love is, in the truest sense of the word, unconditional. This means

that the friendship he offers us in Christ is also unconditional. Christ is the true friend, whose love and devotion to you doesn't depend on looks, popularity, intelligence, success, money, or anything else: he loves you simply because you are you. He can't love you any more than he already does. There is no pressure here, only peace.

A lot of good it would do if Christ gave these impossible instructions (to love as he loves) and then left us alone to try to carry them out. But he doesn't. He walks this narrow and steep path in front of us and beside us. That was the lesson of Good Friday, when he was betrayed and abandoned by his closest friends, cruelly tortured, slandered, publicly humiliated, unjustly condemned, and put to death. Throughout the ordeal, he never once resented, hated, or retaliated. The love in his heart and his trust in the Father buoyed him up, to the point where his dying words included, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). That also is the lesson of the Eucharist, the supernatural food of our Christian souls; he gives it to us to supplement our weak efforts and to keep us strong as we follow his difficult path.

RESPOND

Sometimes, Lord, (and you know which times I'm talking about) it's hard for me to turn the other cheek, hand over my cloak, and go the extra mile. It is not natural to love one's enemies, Lord, so if you want me to do this, I am going to need a lot of help. But I want to. I know that only truly Christian love will bring peace to my heart, and to the world. Lord Jesus, give me strength...

You have forgiven me so many times. You have practiced everything you preached in relation to me. Somehow, you really do love me. You really are interested in my life. How can that be? I don't understand, but I believe, and I thank you with all my heart, Lord—you know how much I need your love. Teach me to love as you do...

There are so many things I want to do for you and your Church, Lord. My mind and heart are full of desires to change this world and bring everyone around me into your friendship. Yet I can barely control my own temper. Help me focus on the most important thing: loving my neighbor as you have loved me...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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LISTENING UP (MK 9:1–13)

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"Realize that in this life we are travelers on a journey: our true home is in heaven." ~ST. CAJETAN

READ: MARK 9:1–13

And he said to them, "I tell you solemnly, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power." Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain where they could be alone by themselves. There in their presence he was transfigured: his clothes became dazzlingly white, whiter than any earthly bleacher could make them. Elijah appeared to them with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus. Then Peter spoke to Jesus: "Rabbi," he said, "it is wonderful for us to be here; so let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say; they were so frightened. And a cloud came, covering them in shadow; and there came a voice from the cloud, "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him." Then suddenly, when they looked round, they saw no one with them any more but only Jesus. As they came down from the mountain he warned them to tell no one what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They observed the warning faithfully, though among themselves they discussed what "rising from the dead" could mean. And they put this question to him, "Why do the scribes say that Elijah has to come first?" "True," he said, "Elijah is to come first and to see that everything is as it should be; yet how is it that the scriptures say about the Son of Man that he is to suffer grievously and be treated with contempt? However, I tell you that Elijah has come and they have treated him as they pleased, just as the scriptures say about him."

REFLECT

At times, God grants us exceptional clarity, joy, and satisfaction along our path of Christian discipleship. He does so because he knows that we need foretastes of the happiness he has in store for us if we are to endure the crosses that mark our way. But sometimes, like spoiled children, we hold on to those good feelings as if they were God himself. We echo Peter's petition: "Lord, it is good for us to be here! Let's just put up some tents and never leave!" But earth is not heaven, and God loves us too much to let us settle for anything less than the fullness of his friendship. And so, he leads us down from our high mountains and walks with us to Calvary, where he teaches us to love him and not just his gifts, to give of ourselves, and to store up our treasure in heaven.

RESPOND

Why do I take you for granted? You are too patient with me. Maybe I need a dramatic, Transfiguration-type experience to wake me up. I believe in you, Lord. I believe that you are the Eternal King, the Lord, the Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. And I believe that you—the same Lord, God, and Savior—are really and truly present in the Eucharist... I want to keep listening to you, Lord... Please speak to my heart. Help me to know what you would have me say and do in each moment, in each relationship of my life. Make me like you, so that the right thing, the true thing, the fruitful thing is my natural preference in every situation. Thy will be done, Lord, in every corner of my life...

You promise crosses, but you also promise resurrection. Get me ready for my crosses, because I want to experience the new life you won for me through your Resurrection. Teach me to die to everything that is selfish and petty, so that your grace and your life can flow through me and spread your Kingdom among everyone around me...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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LOVE, GIVE, AND LIVE (LK 6:27–38)

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“The measure of love is to love without measure.” ~ST. AUGUSTINE

READ: LUKE 6:27–38

“But I say this to you who are listening: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly. To the man who slaps you on one cheek, present the other cheek too; to the man who takes your cloak from you, do not refuse your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and do not ask for your property back from the man who robs you. Treat others as you would like them to treat you. If you love those who love you, what thanks can you expect? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what thanks can you expect? For even sinners do that much. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what thanks can you expect? Even sinners lend to sinners to get back the same amount. Instead, love your enemies and do good, and lend without any hope of return. You will have a great reward, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge, and you will not be judged yourselves; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned yourselves; grant pardon, and you will be pardoned. Give, and there will be gifts for you: a full measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be poured into your lap; because the amount you measure out is the amount you will be given back.”

REFLECT

Jesus presents us with a new way of living so that our “reward will be great” and “there

will be gifts” for us. Sometimes we mistakenly think that a Christian ought somehow to be indifferent to the human desire for happiness, as if wanting to be happy were some kind of sin. The truth is much more realistic: the desire for happiness is a gift from God, a homing device that impels us towards God, the only source of true and lasting happiness. If Christ demands sacrifice and generosity, if his way of life seems hard, if the cross is painful, it’s only a temporary pain, like that of someone recovering from reconstructive surgery: the doctor demands a long and arduous rehabilitation program so that the patient can once again enjoy a healthy, active, and happy life. Christ is the doctor of our fallen, selfish souls, and he eagerly looks forward to the day when we will join him on the tennis courts in heaven.

RESPOND

You want me to be truly happy. You will never be satisfied with the counterfeit happiness this world offers, the kind I sometimes would prefer. You love me too much. I believe in you, Lord, but it’s hard to follow your path. I need your grace. You know I do. You will never hoard your help. Thank you, Lord. Teach me to do your will...

Your standard of love is much too high for me. So, if you want me to live that way, you are going to have to come and be my light and my strength. Send your Holy Spirit into my soul and into the souls of all the members of your Church. Grant us a renewal of authentic Christian charity. You are all-powerful, Lord—you can do it! Come Holy Spirit, enkindle in me the fire of your love...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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LEARNING FROM THE PHARISEES (MT 23:1–12)

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"The man who loves God thinks it enough to please him whom he loves, for no greater reward can be sought than that love itself." ~POPE ST. LEO THE GREAT

READ: MATTHEW 23:1–12

Then addressing the people and his disciples Jesus said, "The scribes and the Pharisees occupy the chair of Moses. You must therefore do what they tell you and listen to what they say; but do not be guided by what they do: since they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but will they lift a finger to move them? Not they! Everything they do is done to attract attention, like wearing broader phylacteries and longer tassels, like wanting to take the place of honor at banquets and the front seats in the synagogues, being greeted obsequiously in the market squares and having people call them Rabbi. You, however, must not allow yourselves to be called Rabbi, since you have only one master, and you are all brothers. You must call no one on earth your father, since you have only one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor must you allow yourselves to be called teachers, for you have only one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you must be your servant. Anyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and anyone who humbles himself will be exalted."

REFLECT

It must have been difficult for Jesus to speak so harshly about the Pharisees and scribes. He only did so for the sake of the crowds and disciples who had witnessed the ongoing controversy. Jesus had done everything within his power—while still respecting his enemies' freedom—to win over his attackers, to meet them on their own ground, to open

their closed minds to his saving truth. Only then does he pronounce judgment on them. Even this harsh task of uprooting the Jewish authorities—a task Jesus had the right and duty to perform, for the sake of those whom the authorities were leading astray—is performed with generosity, in the context of teaching a lesson that will serve the good of all.

Christ taught this lesson many times with words, all the time with his actions, and one time forever with his passion, the ultimate expression of his love: “He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:7–8).

RESPOND

Never let me deceive myself, Lord. Help me to see myself as I truly am. I want to follow you, to hear your voice each moment, to see your providential, loving action in every happening and encounter of my life. Teach me to walk by faith, Lord, not by sight...

I can only strive to please you if I know what truly pleases you. And I can only know what pleases you if I study and pray. I need you to keep me humble, Lord. I tend so easily to slip into that self-destructive thirst for recognition and superiority. That tendency goes deep—only your love goes deeper. Purify my heart, Lord. Teach me to think first of others, and then of myself, just as you did. Jesus, I trust in you...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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SERVANTS AND SIGNS (MT 20:20–24)

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"He it is whose sufferings are shared by the martyrs with their glorious courage and by all those who believe and are born again at the moment of their regeneration." ~ POPE ST. LEO THE GREAT

READ: MATTHEW 20:20–34

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came with her sons to make a request of him, and bowed low; and he said to her, "What is it you want?" She said to him, "Promise that these two sons of mine may sit one at your right hand and the other at your left in your kingdom." "You do not know what you are asking," Jesus answered. "Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?" They replied, "We can." "Very well," he said, "you shall drink my cup, but as for seats at my right hand and my left, these are not mine to grant; they belong to those to whom they have been allotted by my Father." When the other ten heard this they were indignant with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that among the pagans the rulers lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you. No; anyone who wants to be great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

As they left Jericho a large crowd followed him. Now there were two blind men sitting at the side of the road. When they heard that it was Jesus who was passing by, they shouted, "Lord! Have pity on us, Son of David." And the crowd scolded them and told them to keep quiet, but they only shouted more loudly, "Lord! Have pity on us, Son of David." Jesus stopped, called them over and said, "What do you want me to do for

you?" They said to him, "Lord, let us have our sight back." Jesus felt pity for them and touched their eyes, and immediately their sight returned and they followed him.

REFLECT

James and John send their mother to make a bold request, one they were probably ashamed to make themselves (as evidenced by the umbrage the other disciples take at hearing about it). Jesus sees through their ploy. He addresses his answer to them and not to her. But he answers without taking offense. He is glad that these two disciples want to be close to him and be great in his Kingdom. If he could give them what they ask for, he would. But since he can't promise them that, he will give them the next best thing: they too will suffer for the Kingdom (thus staying close to him). Here he teaches them the secret to real greatness—serving, giving, forgetting oneself. Is our path any different? Jesus wants us to confide in him, to be honest with him; that's all he needs in order to make us his everlasting friends.

RESPOND

I too want to see, Lord. I want to see you. I want to see the truth about myself, about the world, and about the meaning of life. I want to see your will for me and the way to fulfill it. I want to see the needs of those around me and how to meet them. I want to see the beauty of your doctrine and of your heart, so that no other ambition will interfere with my striving to be truly great in your Kingdom...

Lord, I am reluctant to serve. My natural tendency is to want to be served, especially at home, among those I should serve most. So often I think first of myself. But if you call me to follow in your footsteps, to give my life for others, then it must be possible. You never ask the impossible. Through you, with you, and in you, I can be all that you created me to be. Okay, Lord, whatever you want. Thy will be done...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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MONEY AND FIRE (LK 16:19-31)

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"Girding our loins then with faith and the observance of good deeds let us so follow his paths under the guidance of the gospel that we may be worthy to see him who has called us into his kingdom." ~ST. BENEDICT

READ: LUKE 16:19-31

"There was a rich man who used to dress in purple and fine linen and feast magnificently every day. And at his gate there lay a poor man called Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to fill himself with the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. Dogs even came and licked his sores. Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In his torment in Hades he looked up and saw Abraham a long way off with Lazarus in his bosom. So he cried out, 'Father Abraham, pity me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames.' 'My son, 'Abraham replied, 'remember that during your life good things came your way, just as bad things came the way of Lazarus. Now he is being comforted here while you are in agony. But that is not all: between us and you a great gulf has been fixed, to stop anyone, if he wanted to, crossing from our side to yours, and to stop any crossing from your side to ours.' The rich man replied, 'Father, I beg you then to send Lazarus to my father's house, since I have five brothers, to give them warning so that they do not come to this place of torment too.' 'They have Moses and the prophets,' said Abraham, 'let them listen to them.' 'Ah no, father Abraham,' said the rich man, 'but if someone comes to them from the dead, they will repent.' Then Abraham said to him, 'If they will not listen either to Moses or to the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone should rise from the dead.'"

REFLECT

Perhaps Christ's greatest act of charity was his patient effort to win over the hearts of the self-satisfied Pharisees. Many of them showed no sign of respect or even mild interest in the truth of his claims, and yet he kept buffeting them with parables and miracles, desperately hoping that they would let in the light of his grace. Christ commanded his disciples to love their enemies, to forgive those who persecuted them, and he shows them how—by being a true friend to his most vicious antagonists.

He continues this conquest of love. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow, Jesus continues to go after every single soul. He wants to hold each one close to his heart, just as Lazarus was held close in Abraham's bosom. It is God's will that none be lost. His mission is to draw all men to himself. This is the desire in the heart of our Friend, and if we are to be faithful, it should become our desire too, for he has given us a share in this same mission of gathering souls to the bosom of the Father.

RESPOND

So many people live as if this life were all there is. Why? Why don't we believe in heaven and hell? I admit, it's possible to get obsessed with the afterlife, but it would be a foolish traveler who kept moving ahead every day without ever thinking about his destination. Keep me in tune with the truth, Lord, and teach me to bear witness with courage and love...

Who are my enemies, my antagonists? Do I love them as you loved yours? The Pharisees didn't give you warm, fuzzy feelings, but you loved them all the same. You went out of your way to give them what they most needed—a vision of your love and truth. Teach me to love as you love and to give as you give...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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A VALUABLE VINEYARD (MT 21:33–46)

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“My daughter, all your miseries have been consumed in the flame of My love, like a little twig thrown into a roaring fire.”

~WORDS OF JESUS TO ST. FAUSTINA KOWALSKA

READ: MATTHEW 21:33–46

“Listen to another parable. There was a man, a landowner, who planted a vineyard; he fenced it round, dug a winepress in it and built a tower; then he leased it to tenants and went abroad. When vintage time drew near he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his servants, thrashed one, killed another and stoned a third. Next he sent some more servants, this time a larger number, and they dealt with them in the same way. Finally, he sent his son to them. They will respect my son, he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, This is the heir. Come on, let us kill him and take over his inheritance. So they seized him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” They answered, “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will deliver the produce to him when the season arrives.” Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: It was the stone rejected by the builders that became the keystone. This was the Lord’s doing and it is wonderful to see? I tell you, then, that the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.” When they heard his parables, the chief priests and the scribes realized he was speaking about them, but though they would have liked to arrest him they were afraid of the crowds, who looked on him as a prophet.

REFLECT

The owner of the vineyard would have had every right to punish the tenants after they had done away with the first batch of servants. But he didn't. He sent more, and more, and finally he sent his son. Only when we have made a definitive decision against him and held fast to that decision in the face of abundant gestures of his love will he let us have what we have wrongly chosen. Christ, the true friend, does not condemn those who refuse his friendship; they condemn themselves.

JESUS: I will never give up on you. If only you knew how much I love my Church, and every person in it. If only you knew how patient my Father is, how magnificently and unabashedly he loves each one of his children! Since I will never give up on you, you must never give up on yourself. No matter how many times you offend me, fail, or reject me, I am always ready and willing to renew our friendship. I am always taking the first step, moving you and inspiring you to come back to me.

RESPOND

I pray for those who are far from you, for those who don't recognize the hardness of their own hearts. Conquer them with your grace. Don't let them perish, but grant them eternal life. All things are possible for you, Lord, so soften their hearts. Reach out to them through me. I too want to give my life for the salvation of others. For the sake of your sorrowful passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world...

What are you saying to me that I am not hearing? What relationship do I need to reform? What responsibility am I neglecting? What mission am I ignoring? Lord, I know that following you will always require the painful steps of humility. Never let me take any other path. Never let me be separated from you...

Thank you for never giving up on me. Thank you for being so patient with me. Thank you for inspiring good desires in my heart. Lord, teach me to be truly humble, to place all my confidence in you, and to learn the secret of lasting joy. Make me a channel of your peace...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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DAY 18
MARCH 6, 2021

COMING HOME (LK 15:11–32)

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“On the basis of this way of manifesting the presence of God who is Father, love, and mercy, Jesus makes mercy one of the principal themes of his preaching.”

~ST. JOHN PAUL II

READ: LUKE 15:11–32

He also said, “A man had two sons. The younger said to his father, ‘Father, let me have the share of the estate that would come to me.’ So the father divided the property between them. A few days later, the younger son got together everything he had and left for a distant country where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery. When he had spent it all, that country experienced a severe famine, and now he began to feel the pinch, so he hired himself out to one of the local inhabitants who put him on his farm to feed the pigs. And he would willingly have filled his belly with the husks the pigs were eating but no one offered him anything. Then he came to his senses and said, ‘How many of my father’s paid servants have more food than they want, and here am I dying of hunger! I will leave this place and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your paid servants.’ So he left the place and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him tenderly. Then his son said, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the calf we have been fattening, and kill it; we are going to have a feast, a celebration, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

“Now the elder son was out in the fields, and on his way back, as he drew near the house, he could hear music and dancing. Calling one of the servants he asked what it was all about. ‘Your brother has come,’ replied the servant, ‘and your father has killed the calf we had fattened because he has got him back safe and sound.’ He was angry then and refused to go in, and his father came out to plead with him; but he answered his father, ‘Look, all these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed your orders, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property—he and his women—you kill the calf we had been fattening.’ The father said, ‘My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours. But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found.’”

REFLECT

“While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him... ” God never stops hoping that we will come to him. He has his eyes on us all the time—not to pounce on us when we mess up, but to run to us, embrace us, kiss us, and clothe us with the robe of his grace and the sandals of divine sonship (servants went barefoot in ancient households, but family members wore sandals). The devil likes to make us forget about this—especially when we most need to remember it; let’s not give him that pleasure.

We can also please the Father by going in search of our prodigal brothers and sisters. The rebellious son abandons his father, and his father respects that—he won’t go out and try to force his son to come back home. But if the older brother had really cared for both his father and his younger sibling, he could have made a trek or two in search of the unfortunate youth. We can imagine the conversation they would have had at the pig farm. The older brother, “We miss you and we would love for you to come back.” The younger brother, “But how can I, what I did was so horrible?” “Don’t worry, just come back—trust me, we’ll work it out. You don’t have to stay here eating corn husks... ”

How many lost and sorrowful younger brothers are all around us, if only we would open the eyes of our hearts to see them! And how easy it would be to invite them back to the Father’s house, if only we could see beyond our self-centered preoccupations!

RESPOND

While the Pharisees needed to understand your goodness and mercy, I think that at

times I need to be more aware of the evil of sin. I have been infected by the prevailing mentality that forgets about personal responsibility and about the wounds selfishness causes to others. Lord, why do I act as if self-centeredness were okay? Free me, Lord, to love...

Something made that younger son come back to his senses. You are working in mysterious, hidden ways in every heart. I have placed my hope in you, because I believe that you are the way, the truth, and the life. But sometimes I have less confidence in your ability to help others, who seem so far from the truth, to come to their senses. Increase my hope, Lord...

I don't have to go far to find people who are in trouble, who are sad, who need to come back to you and don't know the way. Open my heart so I can reach out to them. Will you not use my slightest effort, even if it's clumsy, as a channel of grace? I don't want to hoard the treasure you have given me—knowing your love. The more I give away, the more you will give to me...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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FOOD FOR LIFE (JN 4:31–42)

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“The best way to become a saint is to plunge ourselves in the will of God, as a stone is immersed in the water. We must allow ourselves to be tossed like a ball here and there according to his good pleasure.” ~ST. CLEMENT HOFBAUER

READ: JOHN 4:31–42

Meanwhile, the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, do have something to eat; but he said, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” So the disciples asked one another, “Has someone been bringing him food?” But Jesus said: “My food is to do the will of the one who sent me, and to complete his work. Have you not got a saying: Four months and then the harvest? Well, I tell you: Look around you, look at the fields; already they are white, ready for harvest! Already the reaper is being paid his wages, already he is bringing in the grain for eternal life, and thus the sower and reaper rejoice together. For here the proverb holds good: one sows, another reaps; I sent you to reap a harvest you had not worked for. Others worked for it; and you have come into the rewards of their trouble.” Many Samaritans of that town had believed in him on the strength of the woman’s testimony when she said, “He told me all I have ever done,” so, when the Samaritans came up to him, they begged him to stay with them. He stayed for two days, and when he spoke to them many more came to believe; and they said to the woman, “Now we no longer believe because of what you told us; we have heard him ourselves and we know that he really is the savior of the world.”

REFLECT

Jesus explains that sometimes those who plant and those who harvest celebrate together. Other times, however, those who plant may never see the harvest, and those

who gather may not have labored in the planting. In this way, he gives courage and comfort to those who have decided to accept his offer of friendship and work with him to build the Kingdom; he prepares them for two possible scenarios as they try to gather the harvest.

JESUS: At times you will see success and results right away; your efforts to build my Kingdom will yield abundant fruit quickly and easily. In those times, you must not give in to the temptation that will surely come, that of thinking that your talents and efforts alone have brought in the crop. I was the one who prepared those people to find me and hear my call through your voice. Rejoice then, but remember that the soil had been fertilized, tilled, and planted by other hands, and that I was the one who made the seeds grow. Other times I will ask you to do the fertilizing, tilling, and planting, and you may never see the results. Are you ready for that? I ask that of you because I know you love me, and I want to purify your love. If you persevere even when you don't see results, you will have to exercise that love, and you will no longer be working for the praise and recognition of others, but solely for me and my Kingdom. Then, as your love grows, you will begin to experience true joy and true freedom. I will be able to fill your soul with my wisdom and love, because it will have been emptied a little bit more of the vanity and pride that clogs the flow of my grace.

RESPOND

I believe that you are the Savior of the world, Lord. And I believe that the world needs a Savior. We are all thirsty for the living water of your Spirit. I am thirsty, Lord. Increase my faith. Deepen my conviction. What does it really mean for me to say that I believe you are the Savior of the world? It made a difference in the lives of these Samaritans. Help it make a bigger difference in my life, Lord...

You lived wholly for the mission your Father had given you. I, too, have a mission. You have given me life and faith and relationships and responsibilities. You have made me a member of your Church, the extension of your Incarnation. How I long for my life to be focused and ordered, as yours was! Teach me to make your will the compass of my life, the quest of my heart, my anchor and my guiding star...

I want to build your Kingdom. I want to put my talents at the service of the men and women you love so much, the ones you came to save. But you know that my motives are

not pure. SO much selfishness is still mixed in. Purify me, Lord. Remind me that you are the Lord of the harvest and I am only one worker among many. Help me to find all my satisfaction in loving you by doing your will.

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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TROUBLES AT HOME (LK 4:22–30)

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If you search for the reason why a man loves God, you will find no other reason at all, save that God first loved him. ~ST. AUGUSTINE

READ: LUKE 4:22–30

And he won the approval of all, and they were astonished by the gracious words that came from his lips. They said, "This is Joseph's son, surely?" But he replied, "No doubt you will quote me the saying, 'Physician, heal yourself' and tell me, 'We have heard all that happened in Capernaum, do the same here in your own countryside.'" And he went on, "I tell you solemnly, no prophet is ever accepted in his own country. There were many widows in Israel, I can assure you, in Elijah's day, when heaven remained shut for three years and six months and a great famine raged throughout the land, but Elijah was not sent to any one of these: he was sent to a widow at Zarephath, a Sidonian town. And in the prophet Elisha's time there were many lepers in Israel, but none of these was cured, except the Syrian, Naaman." When they heard this everyone in the synagogue was enraged. They sprang to their feet and hustled him out of the town; and they took him up to the brow of the hill their town was built on, intending to throw him down the cliff, but he slipped through the crowd and walked away.

REFLECT

JOHN: *I often wondered why Jesus didn't claim his rights. He could have—there were many times when I wanted him to. If he had stayed more aloof in public, perhaps more people would have believed in him—people are funny that way. If he had insulated himself behind hundreds of servants and deputies and courtiers, letting himself be seen and heard only on the rarest of*

occasions and performing an impressive miracle every once in a while, he would have appealed more readily to the human appetite for sensationalism. But he didn't do it that way. He wanted to walk among his people, to touch and heal their diseases, to hear their stories and speak to them of his Kingdom, to be with them. How he loved to be among people! That was always his desire. He always risked being rejected as ordinary in order to be accepted as a friend. When my turn came to go out and spread the good news, I thought to myself: If that's the way our Lord did it, then that's the way his followers should do it as well.

RESPOND

To be completely honest, Lord, I have to admit that I am often weighed down by problems—problems in the world, problems in my own life, problems in my family. I know that you have chosen to save us by meeting us in the midst of our problems, but I also know that not all suffering is necessary, healthy, or desired by you. Help me to see the difference, so I can live in your peace...

I never want to fall into an empty routine. I never want my faith to dim or my love to grow cold. Only you can keep my commitment fresh, Lord. And any of your followers who are just going through the motions, or who are giving into selfishness—I pray for them now. Especially your priests and consecrated souls. Keep their love fresh; stir their hearts with your wisdom and zeal...

You have given me such a treasure in my Catholic faith. Show me how to share it. Often I don't know when to speak and when to stay silent. I don't know what others are thinking or suffering. But you do. You know exactly what everyone needs. Guide me; give me courage and simplicity. Make me a channel of your peace...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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OCEAN OF MERCY (MT 18:21–35)

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“O Christian, be aware of your nobility—it is God’s own nature that you share; do not then, by an ignoble life, fall back into your former baseness.”

~POPE ST. LEO THE GREAT

READ: MATTHEW 18:21–35

Then Peter went up to him and said, “Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?” Jesus answered, “Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times.

“And so the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who decided to settle his accounts with his servants. When the reckoning began, they brought him a man who owed ten thousand talents; but he had no means of paying, so his master gave orders that he should be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, to meet the debt. At this, the servant threw himself down at his master’s feet. Give me time he said and I will pay the whole sum. And the servant’s master felt so sorry for him that he let him go and cancelled the debt. Now as this servant went out, he happened to meet a fellow servant who owed him one hundred denarii; and he seized him by the throat and began to throttle him. Pay what you owe me he said. His fellow servant fell at his feet and implored him, saying, Give me time and I will pay you. But the other would not agree; on the contrary, he had him thrown into prison till he should pay the debt. His fellow servants were deeply distressed when they saw what had happened, and they went to their master and reported the whole affair to him. Then the master sent for him. You wicked servant, he said I cancelled all that debt of yours when you appealed to me. Were you not bound, then, to have pity on your fellow servant just as I had pity on you? And in his anger the master handed him over to the torturers till he should pay all his

debt. And that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother from your heart.”

REFLECT

This brilliant parable rightly convicts us of our repulsive self-righteousness, but we should not therefore overlook its illustration of Christ’s magnanimity. Jesus himself is the King who forgives the huge amount of ten thousand talents—an unimaginable, astronomical quantity of money. Likewise, Christ’s compassion exceeds even the malice of his own murderers: “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do,” he spoke from the cross (Lk 23:34).

JESUS: You can count on my forgiveness. You just need to do what this servant did: kneel down before me and ask for it. I know that sometimes it’s hard for you to accept this forgiveness; your pride keeps you from forgiving yourself, so you hold my forgiveness at arm’s length, or you doubt it. I don’t want you to doubt my forgiveness. I want you to be absolutely sure. This is why I made it tangible in the sacrament of reconciliation. When you come to me through the ministry of my chosen, ordained priest, you actually hear my own words speaking through his voice: “I absolve you from your sins....” I invented this wonderful gift just for you, just so I could flood the depths of your misery with the ocean of my mercy.

RESPOND

It amazes me to think that I can always come to you; I can always ask you a question; you are always available. You never cease thinking of me. Like Peter, I can turn to you to resolve my doubts. Why do I turn to you so infrequently? Why do I forget about your presence, your guidance, your passionate interest in my life?

Forgiveness is harder for me in some cases than others. Some people who have wounded me really don’t deserve to be forgiven, Lord. And yet, you offer your forgiveness to them. Why, then, do I resist? Free me from this snare of the devil. Teach me to forgive, no matter how I feel. Refresh my embittered heart. You love even those who have offended me terribly, and you can turn them into saints...

Thank you for putting no limits on how much you would forgive me. Thank you for continuing to assure me of your forgiveness through confession. There is no hesitancy in

your love for me, no holding back, no tinge of self-seeking. Why don't I trust you more?
Jesus, teach me to trust you more...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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THE HEART OF THE MATTER (MT 5:17–37)

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“The Christian life is the continuation and completion of the life of Christ in us. We should be so many Christs here on earth, continuing his life and his works, laboring and suffering... ” ~ST. JOHN EUDES

READ: MATTHEW 5:17–37

“Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete them. I tell you solemnly, till heaven and earth disappear, not one dot, not one little stroke, shall disappear from the Law until its purpose is achieved. Therefore, the man who infringes even one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be considered the least in the kingdom of heaven; but the man who keeps them and teaches them will be considered great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, if your virtue goes no deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven. ‘You have learnt how it was said to our ancestors: You must not kill; and if anyone does kill he must answer for it before the court. But I say this to you: anyone who is angry with his brother will answer for it before the court; if a man calls his brother Fool he will answer for it before the Sanhedrin; and if a man calls him Renegade he will answer for it in hell fire. So then, if you are bringing your offering to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and present your offering. Come to terms with your opponent in good time while you are still on the way to the court with him, or he may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the officer, and you will be thrown into prison. I tell you solemnly, you will not get out till you have paid the last penny.

“You have learnt how it was said: You must not commit adultery. But I say this to you: if a man looks at a woman lustfully, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye should cause you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; for it will do you less harm to lose one part of you than to have your whole body thrown into hell. And if your right hand should cause you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; for it will do you less harm to lose one part of you than to have your whole body go to hell. It has also been said: Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a writ of dismissal. But I say this to you: everyone who divorces his wife, except for the case of fornication, makes her an adulteress; and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

“Again, you have learnt how it was said to our ancestors: You must not break your oath, but must fulfil your oaths to the Lord. But I say this to you: do not swear at all, either by heaven, since that is God’s throne; or by the earth, since that is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, since that is the city of the great king. Do not swear by your own head either, since you cannot turn a single hair white or black. All you need say is Yes if you mean yes, No if you mean no; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

REFLECT

The Greek word Jesus uses for hell is “Gehenna.” Gehenna was Jerusalem’s garbage dump. It had been the valley where unfaithful Jews in past centuries offered human sacrifices to foreign gods. When the nation reformed and such practices were stopped, they decided to use Gehenna as an open-air incinerator. Thus, the ever-smoldering and worm-infested valley became a symbol for the place where people who reject friendship with God suffer eternal frustration: hell.

Christ’s frequent mention of hell in the Gospels has caused some critics to accuse Christianity of manipulating weak and superstitious people by instilling fear. Nothing could be less accurate. Christ’s warnings are those of a friend. If you were in the car with a friend and saw that he was about to collide with an oncoming eighteen-wheeler, you would try to get him to turn out of the way. Jesus knows that we can only reach lasting happiness through friendship with God, and he wants us to be happy, so he warns us about everything that could damage or destroy that friendship. The truth is that eternity spent without God will be indescribably painful, because the human person was created to live in union with God. Since Christ loves us, he tells us the truth—even the tough truth.

RESPOND

You care about what happens in my mind and my heart—where only you and I can see. Help me look there now; show me what is pleasing to you and what is not, and then change what is not. Please, Lord—you know I can't do it on my own. You know how self-centered and wounded I am. If you don't change my heart, it will never change. Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart more like yours...

Why do you give so much importance to such little things? A false promise here, a lustful fantasy there, an angry or spiteful word now and then... Lord, why don't you teach us about political systems and economic justice—the big picture? Somehow, the little picture of each soul matters more to you. Make me wise, Lord; teach me to follow you...

Some aspects of your will are harder for me to follow than others. Some of the Church's teachings I understand easily—others not so much. It doesn't matter, Lord. What matters is that I know it comes from you, my Creator and Redeemer. I want to do your will, no matter how hard. Increase my weak faith; Jesus, I trust in you...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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A CLOSER LOOK AT THE DEVIL (LK 11:14–26)

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“To choose rightly it is necessary to concentrate on the end for which I am created, that is, for the praise of God and for the salvation of my soul.”

~ST. IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA

READ: LUKE 11:14–26

He was casting out a devil and it was dumb; but when the devil had gone out the dumb man spoke, and the people were amazed. But some of them said, “It is through Beelzebul, the prince of devils, that he casts out devils.” Others asked him, as a test, for a sign from heaven; but, knowing what they were thinking, he said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself is heading for ruin, and a household divided against itself collapses. So too with Satan: if he is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand?—Since you assert that it is through Beelzebul that I cast out devils. Now if it is through Beelzebul that I cast out devils, through whom do your own experts cast them out? Let them be your judges then. But if it is through the finger of God that I cast out devils, then know that the kingdom of God has overtaken you. So long as a strong man fully armed guards his own palace, his goods are undisturbed; but when someone stronger than he is attacks and defeats him, the stronger man takes away all the weapons he relied on and shares out his spoil. He who is not with me is against me; and he who does not gather with me scatters. When an unclean spirit goes out of a man it wanders through waterless country looking for a place to rest, and not finding one it says, I will go back to the home I came from. But on arrival, finding it swept and tidied, it then goes off and brings seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and set up house there, so that the man ends up by being worse than he was before.”

REFLECT

Jesus is willing to discuss things with his enemies and with those who doubt, just as the Church is always ready to explain her teachings and listen to the problems and complaints of her children and inquirers. Jesus has been facing opposition since the beginning of his life, but he never loses patience, just as the Church is always willing to receive repentant sinners, no matter how many times they need to repent. Jesus teaches, forgives, invites, and sometimes warns, but he never closes the door to salvation. His love won't let him. Even on the cross itself, as his enemies taunt and deride him, he still showers them with his patient and forgiving love: "Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). His whole life is one huge billboard: "You can trust in me no matter what."

RESPOND

Sometimes I hem and haw about what you are asking me. I ask for signs because I don't want to accept what I know your will is. I don't know how you put up with me, Lord. Teach me humility and docility. Teach me the strength and courage to follow you through thick and thin, trusting all the way...

I know that life is a battle between good and evil, but in the rush of everyday life I forget about it. I don't want to live life on the surface! Save me from skimming along on fashionable and passing preoccupations. I want to go deeper. I want to discover and spread your wisdom, your goodness, and your love...

Patience is so hard for me. But you are perfect in your patience, remaining in the Tabernacle day after day. And you nourish me with your own life, feeding my soul with your virtues in Holy Communion. Activate in my heart the strength of your virtue, so that all I do and say will draw others closer to you instead of pushing them away...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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LIFESTYLE BY CHRIST (MK 12:28–37)

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"For our sakes he suffered all the agonies of body and mind, and did not shrink from any torment. He gave us a perfect example of patience and love."

~ST. FRANCIS OF PAOLA

READ: MARK 12:28–37

One of the scribes who had listened to them debating and had observed how well Jesus had answered them, now came up and put a question to him, "Which is the first of all the commandments?" Jesus replied, "This is the first: Listen, Israel, the Lord our God is the one Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You must love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these." The scribe said to him, "Well spoken, Master; what you have said is true: that he is one and there is no other. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself, this is far more important than any holocaust or sacrifice." Jesus, seeing how wisely he had spoken, said, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And after that no one dared to question him any more.

Later, while teaching in the Temple, Jesus said, "How can the scribes maintain that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, moved by the Holy Spirit, said: The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand and I will put your enemies under your feet. David himself calls him Lord, in what way then can he be his son?" And the great majority of the people heard this with delight.

REFLECT

By the response of this questioner, we can tell that he was not a hypocrite, like Jesus' other interrogators. Perhaps he had his suspicions about this rabbi from Galilee who

was making such a stir in Jerusalem, and so he came to find out for himself if Jesus was just another flash-in-the-pan demagogue or the real thing. So he poses a question that makes the perfect litmus test: Which is the greatest commandment? The commandments that governed Israel’s relationship with God were many. The Jewish leaders at the time of Christ were in an ongoing discussion about the relative importance of them. The most influential rabbinic schools agreed that “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength” was indeed the greatest of all commandments. If Jesus had stated something else, this scribe would have known that he could not be trusted.

But, much to the inquirer’s delight, Jesus gives him the right answer—expressing it forcibly. And the scribe acknowledges Christ’s wisdom and acumen, reiterating the answer in his own words (the hypocritical Pharisees would never have done something like that). And because of this sincerity and sound conviction, Christ approves of the scribe and encourages him to continue serving God as he has been doing. We can almost hear the surprised pleasure in Christ’s voice, finally having found a leader in Israel who cares more for what is true than for power and prestige. We can also imagine the surprised satisfaction of the scribe at receiving such a glowing commendation from Jesus. What started as a cold, suspicious encounter became the planting of the seed of friendship.

RESPOND

I am sure you have much more you want to teach me, more you want me to do. But I can’t help wondering: Am I really listening to you? Or am I kind of like the Pharisees, who had plenty of contact with you but were so absorbed by their own plans, hopes, and ideas that their minds were closed to what you had to say? O Jesus, open my eyes; let me hear you and follow you...

You make things so simple, Lord. All I have to do is love God with all my strength, and love my neighbor as myself. How I long to want only that in life! That is what you created me for. You are infinitely lovable, the source of all good things. And my neighbors—all my neighbors, without exception—are created by you and loved by you. O Jesus, make my heart overflow with love... Teach me to pray, Lord. I know I have asked you this before, but I ask again: really teach me to pray, please. I long for your wisdom to shed its light in my mind. I long for your love to inflame my heart. I long for your strength to steel my weak will. You have called me to be your apostle—now please, make me what you want me to be...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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THE ABC'S OF SUCCESS (LK 18:9–17)

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*"Confession heals, confession justifies, confession grants pardon of sin.
All hope consists in confession." ~ST. ISIDORE OF SEVILLE*

READ: LUKE 18:9–17

He spoke the following parable to some people who prided themselves on being virtuous and despised everyone else, "Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood there and said this prayer to himself, 'I thank you, God, that I am not grasping, unjust, adulterous like the rest of mankind, and particularly that I am not like this tax collector here. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes on all I get.' The tax collector stood some distance away, not daring even to raise his eyes to heaven; but he beat his breast and said, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.' This man, I tell you, went home again at rights with God; the other did not. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the man who humbles himself will be exalted." People even brought little children to him, for him to touch them; but when the disciples saw this they turned them away. But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. I tell you solemnly, anyone who does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

REFLECT

Jesus went after the big sinners—you don't get much bigger than "people who prided themselves on being virtuous and despised everyone else." He didn't just preach to the choir (which, in fact, is why his enemies had to have him killed; his influence was simply

becoming too wide-spread). This shows how much he cared about others, and how little he worried about himself. If he had been after comfortable self-satisfaction, he would never have gone after big sinners. This is confirmed by our own experience: When we don't go after those who need Christ most, isn't it because we care more about our own comfortable self-satisfaction than about expanding Christ's Kingdom? His concern for big sinners also gives us another reason to trust him without limits. No sinner is too big for Christ's mercy. His mercy is infinite, like an ocean; even the greatest sins are finite, like a thimble. How foolish we would be to think our thimble was too deep for his ocean!

RESPOND

You are my Lord. I understand what that means: I owe everything to you. You hold my entire existence in the palm of your hand. You never cease thinking of me and drawing me closer to you. You are my Lord, but you are also my Father, my Brother, and my Friend. Jesus, I trust in you...

I ask you to have mercy on me, for all the selfishness I know about, and for all the selfishness I'm unaware of. And I ask you to have mercy on all sinners. It is your mercy that makes your glory shine! Teach me to confide in your mercy no matter what, and to be merciful, forgiving, gentle, and meek—especially with those who don't deserve it...

Pour your courage into my heart, Lord. I am hampered in my apostolate and my testimony because I still care too much about what other people will think. I'm glad you didn't give in to those temptations. Teach me to be adventurous in building your Kingdom and spreading it, even to the "big sinners" who seem so hopeless...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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A BLIND MAN SEES (JN 9:1–17)

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"Let us carry bravely the shield of faith, so that with its protection we may be able to parry whatever the enemy hurls at us." ~ST. CYPRIAN

READ: JOHN 9:1–17

As he went along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, for him to have been born blind?" "Neither he nor his parents sinned," Jesus answered, "he was born blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as the day lasts I must carry out the work of the one who sent me; the night will soon be here when no one can work. As long as I am in the world I am the light of the world." Having said this, he spat on the ground, made a paste with the spittle, put this over the eyes of the blind man, and said to him, "Go and wash in the Pool of Siloam (a name that means 'sent')." So the blind man went off and washed himself, and came away with his sight restored.

His neighbors and people who earlier had seen him begging said, "Isn't this the man who used to sit and beg?" Some said, "Yes, it is the same one." Others said, "No, he only looks like him." The man himself said, "I am the man." So they said to him, "Then how do your eyes come to be open?" "The man called Jesus," he answered, "made a paste, daubed my eyes with it and said to me, 'Go and wash at Siloam'; so I went, and when I washed I could see." They asked, "Where is he?" "I don't know," he answered. They brought the man who had been blind to the Pharisees. It had been a sabbath day when Jesus made the paste and opened the man's eyes, so when the Pharisees asked him how he had come to see, he said, "He put a paste on my eyes, and I washed, and I can see." Then some of the Pharisees said, "This man cannot be from God: he does not keep the sabbath." Others said, "How could a sinner produce signs like this?" And

there was disagreement among them. So they spoke to the blind man again, "What have you to say about him yourself, now that he has opened your eyes?" "He is a prophet," replied the man.

REFLECT

Everything Jesus said and did in his brief life on earth was for us. He was a constant, overflowing gift of truth and grace: "Indeed, from his fullness we have, all of us, received—yes, grace in return for grace... " (Jn 1:16). We should relish his words, his atoning sacrifice to free us from our sins, the Church that he established as his mediator through time and space, and the example he gives us of how to lead a meaningful, fulfilling, and fruitful life. In this passage, he exemplifies an especially important characteristic of that kind of life: "As long as the day lasts I must carry out the work of the one who sent me; the night will soon be here when no one can work."

Jesus lived a busy life, but his busyness was the fruit of love. The blind man had suffered so long with both the physical inconveniences of blindness and the emotional and spiritual pain of wondering why God had sent him this handicap. When Jesus saw him, he recognized all of this. His heart overflowed with love, and his love drove him to heal the man, on the inside as well as on the outside. Jesus didn't waste time, because love wouldn't let him.

Jesus: If only you could understand how brief this earthly life is! Time is so short. Eternity is always at your side. Everything that happens to you now, every opportunity I send you, every invitation I give you, is a chance for you to expand the capacity of your soul for love by exercising self-forgetfulness and self-giving. And the more you expand that capacity, the more I will be able to fill you with the light of my glory when you come home to my Father's house. Think more about this. Work for my Kingdom as if you had little time left to do so, because the truth is that you do have little time left, so little time!

RESPOND

Never let me forget your majesty and glory. This world seems to delight in watering down your magnificence. But I believe in your greatness and your goodness. I want to live in the reality of your presence, like the saints. I want to learn to hear your voice calling out to me in all things, as I know you are doing, because you have promised that your love for me is constant, personal, and determined...

Too frequently, I take your sacraments for granted. You are so humble and gentle; you want to pour the balm of your grace into my life through signs that I can recognize and understand. I want to be grateful and attentive to your gifts. I want to appreciate them as I should and teach others to do the same. Open my eyes, Lord...

You know that I tend to be lazy, Lord. I gravitate toward idleness and self-indulgence. Please take this tendency away so I can be more energetic and constant in doing good and fulfilling your will. O Lord, please pour your Spirit into my heart, purge my soul from the self-seeking habits that hold me back. Make me an apostle, a soldier, a worker—teach me to live with the fervor of someone whose love never grows cold...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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A JOURNEY IN FAITH (JN 4:43–54)

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“What is it that made the holy apostles and martyrs undergo fierce struggles and terrible agonies, if not faith, and above all faith in the Resurrection?”

~POPE BENEDICT XIV

READ: JOHN 4:43–54

When the two days were over Jesus left for Galilee. He himself had declared that there is no respect for a prophet in his own country, but on his arrival the Galileans received him well, having seen all that he had done at Jerusalem during the festival which they too had attended. He went again to Cana in Galilee, where he had changed the water into wine. Now there was a court official there whose son was ill at Capernaum and, hearing that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judaea, he went and asked him to come and cure his son as he was at the point of death. Jesus said, “So you will not believe unless you see signs and portents!” “Sir,” answered the official “come down before my child dies.” “Go home,” said Jesus, “your son will live.” The man believed what Jesus had said and started on his way; and while he was still on the journey back his servants met him with the news that his boy was alive. He asked them when the boy had begun to recover. “The fever left him yesterday,” they said, “at the seventh hour.” The father realized that this was exactly the time when Jesus had said, “Your son will live”; and he and all his household believed. This was the second sign given by Jesus, on his return from Judaea to Galilee.

REFLECT

The tragedy of his son’s illness detached the courtier’s heart from the vain promises of the world and impelled him to seek out Christ. As a result, he and all his family were

brought into the saving realm of grace. Such is the unchanging pattern of growth in Christ. Whenever we admit the limits of our own resources and turn to Jesus for help, we give God's grace room to work.

JESUS: *I performed this miracle for the courtier and his family, but I also did it for you. The miracle showed them how much I cared about them. Once they realized that, their lives blossomed. I care for you as much as I cared for them. I know you as fully as I knew them. I want you to believe in me, and I want you to believe that whatever I ask of you, I ask because I love you. If you believe in me more each day, your life will blossom more each day. I have so much I want to show you and teach you. Follow me; listen to me. I know you are still sick with selfish tendencies. Do you believe I can heal you? Ask me. Trust me. Let me walk with you.*

RESPOND

Lord, I praise you for your glory. All the wonders of this world, from the smallest but-tercup to the farthest star, sing of your goodness. I am surrounded by gifts of your love. Why don't I think of this more often, Lord? Guide my thoughts to you. Help me to see your love at work in all things. Thank you for coming to earth to show us your face. Hallowed be thy name... I am so often torn between following your path of trust and humility and gliding along the wide road of doing what everybody else is doing. Why do I care so much about what others think and say? Why is it so hard for me to do what I know you are asking and inviting me to do? You know, Lord; you know how weak I am. But what does my weakness matter when I have you all to myself to be my strength...

I know you and I believe in you. But what about all the courtiers in the world today who don't know you? Their lives are full of suffering, and they don't know where to go to find relief, meaning, and strength. Draw them to yourself, as you drew this court official. Move their hearts, and make me your ambassador. I will tell them of you...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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STIRRING THINGS UP (JN 5:1–18)

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"Whether I receive good or ill, I return thanks equally to God, who taught me always to trust him unreservedly." ~ST. PATRICK

READ: JOHN 5:1–18

Some time after this there was a Jewish festival, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now at the Sheep Pool in Jerusalem there is a building, called Bethzatha in Hebrew, consisting of five porticos; and under these were crowds of sick people—blind, lame, paralyzed—waiting for the water to move; for at intervals the angel of the Lord came down into the pool, and the water was disturbed, and the first person to enter the water after this disturbance was cured of any ailment he suffered from. One man there had an illness which had lasted thirty-eight years, and when Jesus saw him lying there and knew he had been in this condition for a long time, he said, "Do you want to be well again?" "Sir," replied the sick man, "I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is disturbed; and while I am still on the way, someone else gets there before me." Jesus said, "Get up, pick up your sleeping-mat and walk." The man was cured at once, and he picked up his mat and walked away.

Now that day happened to be the sabbath, so the Jews said to the man who had been cured, "It is the sabbath; you are not allowed to carry your sleeping-mat." He replied, "But the man who cured me told me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.'" They asked, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Pickup your mat and walk?'" The man had no idea who it was, since Jesus had disappeared into the crowd that filled the place. After a while Jesus met him in the Temple and said, "Now you are well again, be sure not to sin any more, or something worse may happen to you." The man went back and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had cured him. It was because he did things like this on the

sabbath that the Jews began to persecute Jesus. His answer to them was, "My Father goes on working, and so do I." But that only made the Jews even more intent on killing him, because, not content with breaking the sabbath, he spoke of God as his own Father, and so made himself God's equal.

REFLECT

This man had been ill for thirty-eight years. It seems from Jesus' later comment when they meet in the Temple that his own sins had been the cause of his illness. It was an illness that made him an invalid, helpless and incapable of contributing to the society around him. And to top it all off, he was a lonely man. He didn't have any friend or family member who could help him down to the pool after the stirring of the waters. And then one day a young rabbi comes up to him. He squats down beside him, looks into his eyes, and asks him if he wants to be cured. Jesus is always taking the initiative in our lives. He knows what we need more than we do. He knows how much we have suffered and how our sins have damaged our souls. He comes to heal and renew us.

The sick man: Of course I wanted to be cured. That's why I was still waiting at the pool. It seemed an odd question to me. So I looked up at this man. I looked into his eyes as I told him that I wasn't fast enough to make it to the healing waters. What I said didn't seem to matter. He looked at me intently, but gently. I don't know how else to describe it. And then he seemed to smile, and there was a fire in his eyes. And he told me to get up, pick up my sleeping mat, and walk. I thought to myself, "Doesn't he see that I can't get up, that I can't carry anything, let alone my sleeping mat? I can't even walk! Doesn't he see me?" For thirty-eight years I had been lame, unable to do any of those things, and this man was telling me to stand up. It was a crazy thing to say. But his eyes weren't crazy. He just kept looking at me intently. I was going to tell him what a crazy idea it was, but his eyes wouldn't let me. Somehow, the fire in his eyes kindled one in my own, and all of a sudden I knew that I just had to do what he was telling me. But how could I? I had to try. Even as part of me objected—it was such an absurd thing that he was saying—I couldn't help but start to hope. And he kept looking at me and, well, I don't know how it happened, but I just started to get up, and all of a sudden I could. And then I picked up my mat. And I started walking. After thirty-eight years! I turned to thank him—but he was gone.

RESPOND

Why didn't the leaders of Jerusalem believe in you? They saw your miracles, but even that couldn't pry their hearts away from their own self-centeredness. It seems so unreasonable. And yet, can I say that my faith is robust and confident? Am I not like those leaders, unable to free myself from my own self-centeredness, in spite of all you have done for me? Teach me, Lord, to do your will. Increase my faith...

Many times, the little things you ask me to do seem impossible. How can I be patient and kind to people who irritate me, who are ungrateful? How can I overcome the repugnance I feel sometimes in the face of my responsibilities? How can I simply trust you when so many things go wrong and nothing seems to work? Lord, I believe in you. If you tell me to get up and walk, I will. Thy will be done...

I want to be as generous as you are, Lord. You saw this man, knew his suffering, and came to his rescue. You have made me your ambassador; you want me to do the same for everyone around me. You want me to keep my eyes open for opportunities to serve, help, and do good. You want me to make that my obsession, as it was yours. Give me your grace, Lord, so that I, too, can "go on working"...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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AIMING AT GOD'S WILL (JN 5:19–30)

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"There is one most priceless pearl: the knowledge of the Savior, the mystery of his Passion, the secret of his Resurrection."~ST. JEROME

READ: JOHN 5:19–30

To this accusation Jesus replied: "I tell you most solemnly, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees the Father doing: and whatever the Father does the Son does too. For the Father loves the Son and shows him everything he does himself, and he will show him even greater things than these, works that will astonish you. Thus, as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so the Son gives life to anyone he chooses; for the Father judges no one; he has entrusted all judgement to the Son, so that all may honor the Son as they honor the Father. Whoever refuses honor to the Son refuses honor to the Father who sent him. I tell you most solemnly, whoever listens to my words, and believes in the one who sent me, has eternal life; without being brought to judgement he has passed from death to life. I tell you most solemnly, the hour will come—in fact it is here already—when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and all who hear it will live. For the Father, who is the source of life, has made the Son the source of life; and, because he is the Son of Man, has appointed him supreme judge. Do not be surprised at this, for the hour is coming when the dead will leave their graves at the sound of his voice: those who did good will rise again to life; and those who did evil, to condemnation. I can do nothing by myself; I can only judge as I am told to judge, and my judging is just, because my aim is to do not my own will, but the will of him who sent me."

REFLECT

Jesus only wants one thing—for us to have life. Death was the consequence of original

sin and continues to be the consequence of all sins. Spiritual death ensues from sin because sin is rebellion against God, a willful separation of oneself from communion, from friendship with God. But since God alone is the source of all life, separation from him means separation from life, from the fullness of that meaningful and fruitful life that he created us to experience. And if friendship with God is not reestablished while one's earthly, biological life lasts, the separation from God will endure in an eternal "condemnation." But those who believe and trust in Jesus regain communion and friendship with God, and so they can be reborn to a meaningful and fruitful life here on earth. And if they stay faithful to their friendship with God until the end of their earthly sojourn, they will "rise again to life" at the end of history, and they will enjoy that friendship for all eternity.

JESUS: *When I look at you and think of you, which I am always doing, I picture you living the life I created you to live. I know that now you still struggle and suffer, but this is only a passing stage. You are still recovering from sin. You are still in rehabilitation, and that always hurts. Keep going. Keep seeking my will. Keep getting up every time you fall. I am right at your side. I am leading you to a life that will fill you with more joy and wisdom and love than you can possibly imagine. I am the life, and I want you to spend forever with me.*

RESPOND

When I try to understand you, Lord, I am blinded by the immensity of your mystery. And yet I know that you came to earth and walked among men and that you continue to stay with me now in your Church and through your sacraments, precisely because you didn't want to keep your distance. You want me to know you. Little by little, Lord, reveal yourself to me. Open my eyes; I want to see your glory...

I know that you want to give me eternal life. You want to give me what I yearn for, passionately, in the very core of my being. You created me for that. But you can only give it to me if I am willing to follow you, if I am willing to seek and fulfill your will, no matter what. I want to, Lord. I want to spend my days doing good for those around me, just as you did, helping others to find life in you, now and for all eternity...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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EASY TO PLEASE (JN 5:31–47)

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"...This love for Christ must ever be the chiefest and most agreeable result of a knowledge of Holy Scripture."

~POPE BENEDICT XV

READ: JOHN 5:31–47

“Were I to testify on my own behalf, my testimony would not be valid; but there is another witness who can speak on my behalf, and I know that his testimony is valid. You sent messengers to John, and he gave his testimony to the truth: not that I depend on human testimony; no, it is for your salvation that I speak of this. John was a lamp alight and shining and for a time you were content to enjoy the light that he gave. But my testimony is greater than John’s: the works my Father has given me to carry out, these same works of mine testify that the Father has sent me. Besides, the Father who sent me bears witness to me himself. You have never heard his voice, you have never seen his shape, and his word finds no home in you because you do not believe in the one he has sent. You study the scriptures, believing that in them you have eternal life; now these same scriptures testify to me, and yet you refuse to come to me for life! As for human approval, this means nothing to me. Besides, I know you too well: you have no love of God in you. I have come in the name of my Father and you refuse to accept me; if someone else comes in his own name you will accept him. How can you believe, since you look to one another for approval and are not concerned with the approval that comes from the one God? Do not imagine that I am going to accuse you before the Father: you place your hopes on Moses, and Moses will be your accuser. If you really believed him you would believe me too, since it was I that he was writing about; but if you refuse to believe what he wrote, how can you believe what I say?”

REFLECT

Jesus is a faithful friend. Once again he publicly praises John the Baptist, who had dedicated his life to serving Christ and bearing him witness. Jesus never forgets deeds done to please him and build up his Kingdom. He is interested in everything we do because he loves us more than the most loving parent, more than the most faithful spouse. He appreciates every effort we make in his name, for his sake. How much confidence this should give us! Even if no one ever knows or sees our sacrifices, our small acts of self-denial and self-giving, Jesus is gathering them up like beautiful flowers and enjoying each one of them. Each one weaves the patchwork of our life. How much freedom this truth can give to our souls! We no longer have to scratch and fight our way to the honors platform in order to win prizes that perish and recognition that withers. In Christ, we can flourish without fear.

JESUS: My love is enough for you. Live in the light of my love. Live for loving me. Seek my approval in all you do; I am so easy to please, and no whims or selfishness or bad moods cloud my appreciation. I lived and died and rose for you. I want to give you the kind of peace and joy that doesn't wear away. All you need is my love.

RESPOND

I believe in you, Lord, but I know so many people who don't believe in you. They are still looking for meaning in awards and money and reputation. They are stuck on that thankless merry-go-round. Thank you for taking me off that and putting me on the path of life. Forgive me for my ingratitude, for the times I resent your demands. Make me your disciple, your spokesperson, to bring many others to your friendship...

Sometimes I am afraid that I am not doing enough for you, Lord. But that's because I keep thinking that I need to earn your love the way I have had to earn the love of others. But you are not like that. You already love me, and nothing I do can increase or decrease that love. Cast out my fears and fill me with the courage and energy that comes from knowing I am loved unconditionally and infinitely by you...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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THE WAIT IS OVER (MT 1:1–17)

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“He who enriches others becomes poor. He took to himself the poverty of my flesh so that I might obtain the riches of his godhead.”

~ST. GREGORY NAZIANZEN

READ: MATTHEW 1:1–17

A genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah, Tamar being their mother, Perez was the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram was the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon was the father of Boaz, Rahab being his mother, Boaz was the father of Obed, Ruth being his mother, Obed was the father of Jesse; and Jesse was the father of King David.

David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah’s wife, Solomon was the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asa, Asa was the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, Joram the father of Azariah, Azariah was the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amon, Amon the father of Josiah; and Josiah was the father of Jechoniah and his brothers. Then the deportation to Babylon took place.

After the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, Zerubbabel was the father of Abiud, Abiud the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, Azor was the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Achim, Achim the father of Eliud, Eliud was the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob; and Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary;

of her was born Jesus who is called Christ. The sum of generations is therefore: fourteen from Abraham to David; fourteen from David to the Babylonian deportation; and fourteen from the Babylonian deportation to Christ.

REFLECT

Genealogies were common among the Jews of Jesus' time. The Jewish people were keenly aware of their special status as God's Chosen People, so they closely guarded their racial purity and recorded their family trees in detail. Most genealogies, however, only contained the male ancestors. In Jesus' genealogy, St. Matthew makes a point of mentioning four women (not including Mary). None of them were Jewish (Tamar and Rahab were Canaanite, Ruth was Moabite, and the wife of Uriah—Bathsheba—was Hittite), and three of them had been involved in dishonorable escapades. Why would St. Matthew break with custom in order to include these names in his list?

Certainly one of the reasons was to emphasize that Christ never held himself aloof from sinners. Later in his Gospel, St. Matthew narrates how Jesus described himself as being sent "for sinners, not the righteous." Jesus never keeps his distance from us when we fail, fall, or falter. Precisely then he runs to our side; it is the lost sheep he longs to embrace and carry home to his flock.

RESPOND

The greatness of your mystery, Lord, stirs my soul. You are the Lord of the entire universe, and you decide to come and walk among us, speak with us, and teach us. Let the wonder of this active love of yours penetrate my heart and clear away all the petty, selfish ideas that cloud my understanding. Help me to live in the light of your glory...

If you in your Providence can guide the entire course of human history without violating human freedom, you can certainly guide the events of my life. If you brought salvation out of annihilation, surely you can bring joy out of my sorrows and success out of my failures. I believe in your goodness and your power. Jesus, I trust in you...

You love without exception. Sinners and the despised are on the top of your list. You smile on the despicable and save them. Why is it so hard for me to follow your example? Why do I play favorites, criticize, and judge others? Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make he longs to embrace and carry home to his flock.

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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WATER FROM THE ROCK (JN 7:37–8:1)

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"Jesus Christ is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega; he is the king of the new world; he is the secret of history; he is the key to our destiny."

~POPE PAUL VI

READ: JOHN 7:37–8:1

On the last day and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood there and cried out: "If any man is thirsty, let him come to me! Let the man come and drink who believes in me!" As scripture says: From his breast shall flow fountains of living water. He was speaking of the Spirit which those who believed in him were to receive; for there was no Spirit as yet because Jesus had not yet been glorified. Several people who had been listening said, "Surely he must be the prophet," and some said, "He is the Christ," but others said, "Would the Christ be from Galilee? Does not scripture say that the Christ must be descended from David and come from the town of Bethlehem?" So the people could not agree about him. Some would have liked to arrest him, but no one actually laid hands on him. The police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees who said to them, "Why haven't you brought him?" The police replied, "There has never been anybody who has spoken like him." "So," the Pharisees answered, "you have been led astray as well? Have any of the authorities believed in him? Any of the Pharisees? This rabble knows nothing about the Law—they are damned." One of them, Nicodemus—the same man who had come to Jesus earlier—said to them, "But surely the Law does not allow us to pass judgement on a man without giving him a hearing and discovering what he is about?" To this they answered, "Are you a Galilean too? Go into the matter, and see for yourself: prophets do not come out of Galilee." They all went home, and Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

REFLECT

St. John was present when Christ announced the coming of the Spirit. He mentions that on the last and greatest day of the feast, Jesus “stood there and cried out: ‘If any man is thirsty, let him come to me!’” Every detail expresses the intensity of Christ’s desire to give away the precious gift of meaning and fulfillment that he alone can give. He waited until the climax of the eight-day celebration. He stood up, which means that he took a very visible posture, where the immense crowds couldn’t help but see him. And then he “exclaimed,” as if to say he shouted, he cried out, he did everything he could to make himself heard. And what did he say? “Come to me if you are thirsty, and I will give you a drink like one you have never had before!” Clearly, he meant more than physical thirst; he was addressing himself to the thirst of the human soul, the thirst for meaning and true happiness that drives every decision and action of every man and woman of every time and place. The deepest longing of the human heart—that is what Christ came to fulfill, and how he craves to fulfill it!

NICODEMUS: *The Sanhedrin was shocked beyond description when the guards returned empty-handed. They couldn’t understand how Jesus was able to move the hearts of everyone who listened to him. They simply refused to confront the truth—they shut it out. I tried to make them see, but they turned on me with such violence that I was disoriented. Wherever Jesus went, people either loved him or hated him. But he always loved. He even loved those who despised him. I warned him and encouraged him to go away, but he was determined to show how much he loved them. When people asked me about him afterwards, that’s what I always said, that he only wanted to convince everyone that they were loved.*

RESPOND

I am thirsty, Lord. I have already tasted the living water that you offer. Your Holy Spirit, your wisdom, your truth, and your love alone satisfy the yearnings of my heart. I was made for you—I was made to know you, to feel your love, and to love you in return. But the more I taste the living water of your grace, the more I want to drink. Send your Spirit, Lord, to be my constant companion, my light, and my refreshment...

If your Spirit is flowing within me, refreshing me with grace at every moment, why do I get tired? Why, Lord, do I keep falling into discouragement and frustration? O Jesus, I

know that you have the answers, but sometimes I wish I had them too. Instruct me, Lord; teach me and guide me. Show me the way to go; purify me of everything that blocks the flow of grace in me and through me...

Why do you care so much about me? Why does it matter to you whether I come and drink from the springs of your grace? You hold the whole universe in your hand, and I am just a little speck in the midst of it. And yet, you have made this invitation resound through twenty centuries until it has reached my ears: "Come to me!" You know my name. You want me beside you. I look at you and I know that I am loved...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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GOD'S TIMING (JN 11:1-16)

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"Rather, my dear brothers, let us be ready for all that God's will may bring, with an undivided heart, firm faith, and rugged strength." ~ST. CYPRIAN

READ: JOHN 11:1-16

There was a man named Lazarus who lived in the village of Bethany with the two sisters, Mary and Martha, and he was ill. It was the same Mary, the sister of the sick man Lazarus, who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair. The sisters sent this message to Jesus, "Lord, the man you love is ill." On receiving the message, Jesus said, "This sickness will end not in death but in God's glory, and through it the Son of God will be glorified." Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, yet when he heard that Lazarus was ill he stayed where he was for two more days before saying to the disciples, "Let us go to Judaea." The disciples said, "Rabbi, it is not long since the Jews wanted to stone you; are you going back again?" Jesus replied: "Are there not twelve hours in the day? A man can walk in the daytime without stumbling because he has the light of this world to see by; but if he walks at night he stumbles, because there is no light to guide him." He said that and then added, "Our friend Lazarus is resting, I am going to wake him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he is able to rest he is sure to get better." The phrase Jesus used referred to the death of Lazarus, but they thought that by "rest" he meant "sleep," so Jesus put it plainly, "Lazarus is dead; and for your sake I am glad I was not there because now you will believe. But let us go to him." Then Thomas—known as the Twin—said to the other disciples, "Let us go too, and die with him."

REFLECT

The messengers arrive tired and breathless; they have traveled in haste. The circle of apostles opens up so they can come close to the Master and deliver their message. Their faces are anxious, fearful, but with a glint of hope that Jesus will come to save the dying Lazarus. And they deliver their message, the simplest and subtlest of messages, composed by Mary and Martha, close friends of Jesus (and probably relatives on Jesus' mother's side according to the scholars): "Lord, the man you love is ill." The messengers look earnestly and eagerly at Christ's face, and the apostles alternate their gazes between Jesus and the messengers. Silence. Then Jesus, looking warmly at the messengers, smiles and answers: "This sickness will not end in death..."

JESUS: Look into my heart at the moment when I heard that message, "The man you love is ill." How it filled my soul with joy! It was the perfect prayer. Martha and Mary knew me so well. They knew that I loved, and they knew that I can't hold back from acting on my love. They could have said, "Lord, the one who loves you is ill," as though because Lazarus loved me, he deserved to be healed. But who loved more, Lazarus or I? I loved him infinitely more than he could ever love me! They could have said, "Lord, come and heal Lazarus, who is ill." But they knew that my love would do much more than they could ever think of. This was the perfect prayer. It throws all their needs and hopes and sorrows into the bottomless ocean of my love. You, too, can pray this prayer. Do you have a need, a worry, a sin that has to be forgiven? Say to me, "Lord, the one you love is ill," and how will I be able to hold myself back from coming to your aid? Do you have someone else who is in need? Tell me, "Lord, the one you love is ill." Can my heart resist that prayer? Is it possible? It may seem that I delay my response, but trust me. My love only seeks fullness of life for you and greater glory for my Father.

RESPOND

I am slow, clumsy and inelegant by nature, Lord. You have to teach me the same lesson a hundred times before I start getting the gist of it. But you are willing to do that. I think that one of the best ways I can praise you is simply by rejoicing in your love, your patience, and your goodness. You are all-powerful, all-loving, and all-good—you are all mine, so I can always rejoice...

You have something for me to do in your Kingdom, just as you had something for

each of your apostles. You have given me a mission in life, and because I am united to you through grace, that mission will resound through all eternity. Without you, what worthwhile thing would I have to do? What could I do that would last? You have given me what I yearn for most: meaning, purpose, a mission...

Lord, I am here, the one you love, and I am ill. I am sick with the infection of selfishness, vanity, arrogance, and self-indulgence. I am weighed down by troubles and worries. Lord, the one you love is ill. I trust in you. You are mercy. You are love...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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GETTING WHAT WE DON'T DESERVE (JN 8:2-11)

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"His attitude towards sinners was full of kindness and loving friendship."

~ST. JOHN BOSCO

READ: JOHN 8:2-11

At daybreak he appeared in the Temple again; and as all the people came to him, he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and Pharisees brought a woman along who had been caught committing adultery; and making her stand there in full view of everybody, they said to Jesus, "Master, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery, and Moses has ordered us in the Law to condemn women like this to death by stoning. What have you to say?" They asked him this as a test, looking for something to use against him. But Jesus bent down and started writing on the ground with his finger. As they persisted with their question, he looked up and said, "If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Then he bent down and wrote on the ground again. When they heard this they went away one by one, beginning with the eldest, until Jesus was left alone with the woman, who remained standing there. He looked up and said, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she replied. "Neither do I condemn you," said Jesus, "go away, and don't sin any more."

REFLECT

JESUS: *I came not to condemn the world, but to save the world. If I just wanted to condemn you, I would have had no reason to come. I know your sins and your weakness, and still I called you and continue to call you. Think for a moment about the one reason behind my incarnation, life, Passion, death,*

Resurrection, and Ascension. Why would I follow such an itinerary? It was only because I want your friendship. Every page and word of the Gospels, every faithful action and teaching of my Church has one, single purpose: to convince you that I want to walk with you now and spend eternity showing you the splendors of my Kingdom. I am all for you, and I ask in return only one thing, the same thing I asked of this adulterous woman: trust me, accept my love, and turn away from your sin.

RESPOND

Make me a channel of your mercy, Lord. Your mercy means that even when I offend you, you keep on loving me and wanting what's best for me. I want to be like that. I want to be like gravity: continually pulling no matter what; I want to keep on showing people your goodness and wisdom. I want to keep on leading them to you, to keep on loving even those I find hard to love...

Forgive me, Lord, for judging my neighbor. How foolish it is for me to pass judgment and criticize and pigeonhole! Can I see their hearts? The Pharisees are quick to condemn because it makes them feel important and superior. But I am even quicker to make excuses for myself and my failings. Teach me to see others as you see them and to speak about them as I would want them to speak about me...

I want to be able to defend your truth and the teachings of your Church, but so often I am at a loss for words. In the midst of conversations and encounters, I get flustered. Afterwards, I think up great responses. You always had the right response. You always knew what to say. Fill me with your grace and your wisdom, Lord, so that I can be your faithful friend and true ambassador...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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CHRIST'S PROGRAM OF LIFE (JN 8:21-30)

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"For God, as I have said, does not work in those who refuse to place all their trust and expectation in him alone." ~ST. JEROME EMILIANI

READ: JOHN 8:21-30

*A*gain he said to them: "I am going away; you will look for me and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come." The Jews said to one another, "Will he kill himself? Is that what he means by saying, 'Where I am going, you cannot come?'" Jesus went on: "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I have told you already: You will die in your sins. Yes, if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins." So they said to him, "Who are you?" Jesus answered:

"What I have told you from the outset. About you I have much to say and much to condemn; but the one who sent me is truthful, and what I have learnt from him I declare to the world." They failed to understand that he was talking to them about the Father. So Jesus said: "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He and that I do nothing of myself: what the Father has taught me is what I preach; he who sent me is with me, and has not left me to myself, for I always do what pleases him." As he was saying this, many came to believe in him.

REFLECT

JESUS: I and my Father are one. When I called you to be my disciple, I called you to live in communion with me just as I do with my Father. And just as my Father "is with me, and has not left me to myself," I am always with you,

and I will never abandon you. In your heart you know this, but even so, you often let yourself be carried away by worries and fears. When I let a cloud block out the sun, does the sun disappear? The sun is always there, and just so I am always watching over you. Every worry and fear that comes across the sky of your soul is a chance for you to exercise your faith and trust in me. That is what pleases me, and that is what sets my grace free to transform you and strengthen you and release your full potential for living as you ought to live. Seek always to do what pleases me, as I always sought to do what was pleasing to my Father, and you will discover anew my presence and grace, over and over again.

RESPOND

I, too, am sometimes hardhearted, like the Pharisees and scribes, who loved their own plans so much that they couldn't even see your plan. Cure me, Lord. Purify my heart. Show me my prejudices and selfish tendencies. Shine the light of your love into all the shadows of my soul. I want to be completely yours. I want to become your faithful disciple, a soldier you can count on...

How simple your program of life is! You seek always and everywhere to do what is pleasing to the Father. Teach me to live like that. Free me from my obsession with pleasing myself. You didn't design me to find fulfillment by navel-gazing—you created me to flourish by self-forgetting love. With the love of your heart, Lord, inflame my heart...

Are you really always with me? Why do you let me feel alone? Why do you let so many clouds block out the sun? You want me to grow up, to mature. You want me to love you for you and not for the light and gifts that you give to me. You want me to exercise the precious virtues of faith, hope, and love, which have to be based on trust. Teach me to leave behind my cold calculations and abandon myself to your goodness...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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HOME FREE (JN 8:31–41)

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"This Lord of ours is the one from whom and through whom all good things come to us." ~ST. TERESA OF AVILA

READ: JOHN 8:31–41

To the Jews who believed in him Jesus said: "If you make my word your home you will indeed be my disciples, you will learn the truth and the truth will make you free." They answered, "We are descended from Abraham and we have never been the slaves of anyone; what do you mean, 'You will be made free?'" Jesus replied: "I tell you most solemnly, everyone who commits sin is a slave. Now the slave's place in the house is not assured, but the son's place is assured. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are descended from Abraham; but in spite of that you want to kill me because nothing I say has penetrated into you. What I, for my part, speak of is what I have seen with my Father; but you, you put into action the lessons learnt from your father." They repeated, "Our father is Abraham." Jesus said to them: "If you were Abraham's children, you would do as Abraham did. As it is, you want to kill me when I tell you the truth as I have learnt it from God; that is not what Abraham did. What you are doing is what your father does."

REFLECT

Christ's word is the expression of his love. He is God, and God is love, and all his actions and words are the revelation of that love. To make his word our home, then, means to dwell in God's love for us—to relish it, to accept it, to drink it in. It involves hearing and heeding his call in our life. This call takes many forms: the nudge of conscience in little and big dilemmas; the deep, insistent, resounding invitation to a particular vocation; the

normal responsibilities of life; the commandments of the Bible and the Church. When Jesus tells us to make his word our home, he is inviting us to dwell in his will and find our comfort, our solace, our rest, and our renewal in it. Jesus comes to rescue us from our vain attempts to concoct some magic formula for self-fulfillment all by ourselves. His will is his word, and his word is the expression of his love, so to dwell in his word is to be in a constant communion with the one who loves us—to live in friendship with Christ. He is the truth, and he will set us free.

RESPOND

I believe in you, Lord. You are the one, true God. Only you are the Savior. I pray for those who don't believe in you. Show yourself to them. Win over their hearts. Free them from sin. And what about those around me who don't believe in you? Send me to them, Lord. I want to build and spread your Kingdom, but I need your grace to tell me what to say, what to do, and how to love them as you have loved me...

I so easily forget that I am a fallen person in a fallen world. You have redeemed me, but you didn't take away the effects of sin. You want me to exercise my faith and love by resisting my tendencies to self-seeking and by obeying the call of your truth. This is virtue, Lord. Virtue is freedom from the merciless and destructive slavery of self-centeredness. Teach me virtue; show me the way to go...

What is your will for me, Lord? Remind me. Life is so busy. Life is so unpredictable. Events and problems and activities swirl around me, and emotions and desires and temptations churn inside me. Make your word alive for me—I hear and read it so often, in Mass, in spiritual reading, and in my prayer, but I want to listen better. I don't want to dwell in my paltry self, and I don't want to dwell in the passing fads of this fallen world. I want to dwell in you, in your word, and in your will. Teach me to do your will...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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THE ANNUNCIATION OF THE LORD

THE GREATEST YES (LK 1:26-38)

“Therefore, though it is God who takes the initiative of coming to dwell in the midst of men, and he is always the main architect of this plan, it is also true that he does not will to carry it out without our active cooperation.”

~POPE BENEDICT XVI

READ: LUKE 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the House of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary. He went in and said to her, “Rejoice, so highly favored! The Lord is with you.” She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean, but the angel said to her, “Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God’s favor. Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the House of Jacob forever and his reign will have no end.” Mary said to the angel, “But how can this come about, since I am a virgin?” “The Holy Spirit will come upon you,” the angel answered, “and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God. Know this too: your kinswoman Elizabeth has, in her old age, herself conceived a son, and she whom people called barren is now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible to God.” “I am the handmaid of the Lord,” said Mary; “let what you have said be done to me.” And the angel left her.

REFLECT

Many friends exchange gifts, but only Christ has given us his own mother, to be our sol-

ace and our refuge as we strive to follow in his footsteps. As he was dying on the cross, Jesus entrusted his mother to the care of his “beloved disciple,” and he entrusted the disciple to her care: “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his home” (Jn 19:26–27).

From its earliest days, the Church has interpreted this passage in a deeply spiritual way: since Jesus has desired to have us as his brothers and sisters, he has also desired to share with us his mother, to give us a mother in the order of grace. Through the ages, Christians in all walks of life have been inspired by Mary’s example, comforted by her spiritual solicitude, and aided by her heavenly intercession. Wherever one finds true devotion to Mary (which consists primarily in the imitation of her yes to God, not just in pious expressions and pretty pictures), one finds as well a passionate love for Jesus Christ, the Savior. She accompanied him on every step of his earthly sojourn, and she accompanies his little brothers and sisters (that’s us) with equal love and concern.

RESPOND

Thank you for making me a Christian. You are the one Savior, the promised Messiah, and your Kingdom will have no end. You have called me into your Kingdom. What more could I ask for? You have given me your friendship. Lord, teach me to live closer to you, to have the same scale of values that you have, and to see all things with your eyes.

Mary, you were just a girl when God came and invited you to be the mother of the Savior. Even then you knew that God’s will was the highest and wisest calling. You didn’t fear missing out on all that the world had to offer, because you only wanted to stay close to the world’s Creator. Teach me to trust and love Christ, and teach me to give him to others, as you gave him to us.

How strange, Lord, that you made the history of salvation depend not only on your own actions, but also on the free cooperation of your creatures! You waited for Mary to say yes before coming to be our Savior. You wait for each of us to say yes before coming to save us. I renew my yes right now. Teach me to help others say yes too; only what I do for your Kingdom will last forever.

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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A SHEPHERD'S LAMENT (JN 10:19-42)

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"Let us have recourse to that fatherly love revealed to us by Christ in his messianic mission, a love which reached its culmination in his cross, in his death and resurrection." ~ST. JOHN PAUL II

READ: JOHN 10:19-42

These words caused disagreement among the Jews. Many said, "He is possessed, he is raving; why bother to listen to him?" Others said, "These are not the words of a man possessed by a devil: could a devil open the eyes of the blind?" It was the time when the feast of Dedication was being celebrated in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the Temple walking up and down in the Portico of Solomon. The Jews gathered round him and said, "How much longer are you going to keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus replied: "I have told you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name are my witness; but you do not believe, because you are no sheep of mine. The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life; they will never be lost and no one will ever steal them from me. The Father who gave them to me is greater than anyone, and no one can steal from the Father. The Father and I are one."

The Jews fetched stones to stone him, so Jesus said to them, "I have done many good works for you to see, works from my Father; for which of these are you stoning me?" The Jews answered him, "We are not stoning you for doing a good work but for blasphemy: you are only a man and you claim to be God." Jesus answered: "Is it not written in your Law: I said, you are gods? So the Law uses the word gods of those to whom the word of God was addressed, and scripture cannot be rejected. Yet you say to someone the Father has consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because he says, 'I am the son of God.' If I am not doing my Father's work, there is no

need to believe me; but if I am doing it, then even if you refuse to believe in me, at least believe in the work I do; then you will know for sure that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.” They wanted to arrest him then, but he eluded them. He went back again to the far side of the Jordan to stay in the district where John had once been baptizing. Many people who came to him there said, “John gave no signs, but all he said about this man was true”; and many of them believed in him.

REFLECT

“I give them eternal life.” Shepherds want their sheep to thrive. They want their sheep to stay safe, to eat well, to be healthy and happy—the shepherds’ livelihood depends on it. Christ is our shepherd.

JESUS: All I want is for you to flourish, to experience the fullness and wonder of life as I designed it to be. Every invitation I make, every indication I give through my words, my example, the commandments, the teachings of my Church, the nudges in your conscience, all has but one purpose: to lead you into the incomparably rich pastures of a life in communion with me, a communion that can begin here on earth but will only reach its fulfillment when you come home to heaven. I want to be your Good Shepherd, and my greatest joy is when you decide to be my good sheep.

RESPOND

You and the Father are one, and you invite me to be one with you. I can’t get over how strange it is that you, Creator of all things, deign to come into my life and address me, guide me, and patiently invite me to follow you and assume responsibility in your Kingdom. You and I both know that I don’t deserve this kind of attention. It flows from your abundant goodness, which will never run dry...

You were eager to dwell among men because you had something to give them—your love, your wisdom, your grace. And now you have made me your messenger. Am I as eager as you were to engage my neighbors, to bring them your light? I am reluctant sometimes. I don’t love enough. But you know that I want to love more. And that’s all you need—you will work wonders through those who trust in you...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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PAR FOR THE CHRISTIAN COURSE (JN 11:45–57)

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“He was crucified on behalf of us all and for the sake of us all, so that, when one had died instead of all, we all might live in him.” ~ST. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA

READ: JOHN 11:45–57

Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and had seen what he did believed in him, but some of them went to tell the Pharisees what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and Pharisees called a meeting. “Here is this man working all these signs,” they said, “and what action are we taking? If we let him go on in this way everybody will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy the Holy Place and our nation.” One of them, Caiaphas, the high priest that year, said, “You don’t seem to have grasped the situation at all; you fail to see that it is better for one man to die for the people, than for the whole nation to be destroyed.” He did not speak in his own person, it was as high priest that he made this prophecy that Jesus was to die for the nation—and not for the nation only, but to gather together in unity the scattered children of God. From that day they were determined to kill him. So Jesus no longer went about openly among the Jews, but left the district for a town called Ephraim, in the country bordering on the desert, and stayed there with his disciples. The Jewish Passover drew near, and many of the country people who had gone up to Jerusalem to purify themselves looked out for Jesus, saying to one another as they stood about in the Temple, “What do you think? Will he come to the festival or not?” The chief priests and Pharisees had by now given their orders: anyone who knew where he was must inform them so that they could arrest him.

REFLECT

The Pharisees appear monstrous to us. Yet we can be just like them. When we are stuck

in our sins or wallowing in self-centeredness, the good deeds of others agitate us; they prick our conscience. We try to stamp them out. We try to minimize them. Instead of rejoicing in goodness wherever we find it, we resent it, and we rejoice instead in our neighbor's fall, since it brings them down to our level. Christ is never like that with us. The more we experience his unquenchable generosity toward us, the more it will purify our stinginess and free us to love our neighbors as he does.

JESUS: *Do you think I despised these corrupt men who countenanced my death and scattered my sheep? How could I? They were as much my sheep as the others. They were more lost than the others, and I longed for their hearts to turn around and come to me. It was for them that I went to the cross. They needed to see the extent of my love for them; they needed to see that nothing they could do to me was able to stop me from loving them. Rest in my heart for a moment now, and see how I love those who hate and persecute me. Since you know that I am always with you, always loving and guiding and protecting you, you have the strength to do the same.*

RESPOND

Thinking about your Providence fills my soul with peace. I know that you are always watching over me and guiding me and those around me. In some hidden way, the many Good Fridays of human history, and of my story, will all erupt into Easter Sundays. You are my Father, and in addition to loving me intensely and tenderly, you hold the reins of the universe and put everything at the service of that love...

How do I react to difficulties and opposition in life? How did you react? You accepted them, and you continued steadfastly on the path of the Father's will. Why do they upset me so much? Jesus, increase my faith...

Lord Jesus, I can barely keep myself from lashing out at colleagues who show up late... how can I learn to love actual enemies, people who willfully destroy reputations and good works? And how can I refrain from criticizing those who exert their energy and influence in resisting your action and your Spirit? Teach me the science of the cross, Lord, and teach me the lesson of Christ-like love...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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PALM SUNDAY

LOVED AND BETRAYED (MK 14:1-11)

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"By his words and actions Christ has showed himself to be true God and Lord of the universe..." ~ST. ANASTASIUS OF ANTIOCH

READ: MARK 14:1-11

It was two days before the Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread, and the chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by some trick and have him put to death. For they said, "It must not be during the festivities, or there will be a disturbance among the people." Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper; he was at dinner when a woman came in with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the ointment on his head. Some who were there said to one another indignantly, "Why this waste of ointment? Ointment like this could have been sold for over three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor"; and they were angry with her. But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why are you upsetting her? What she has done for me is one of the good works. You have the poor with you always, and you can be kind to them whenever you wish, but you will not always have me. She has done what was in her power to do: she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. I tell you solemnly, wherever throughout all the world the Good News is proclaimed, what she has done will be told also, in remembrance of her." Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, approached the chief priests with an offer to hand Jesus over to them. They were delighted to hear it, and promised to give him money; and he looked for a way of betraying him when the opportunity should occur.

REFLECT

Commentators have speculated extensively about Judas' motives. What moved him to betray his Messiah and friend? St. John points out greed as a primary factor; others surmise it was jealousy; still others say that Judas merely wanted to give Jesus an opportunity to show his stuff and throw down his enemies. St. Mark ventures no explanation, but simply records the fact.

Whatever specific reason Judas may have had, one thing is certain: he was dissatisfied with the Kingdom Jesus was offering; he wanted Jesus to be different than he was. Judas had his own idea of what a Savior should be like. He had become Christ's follower harboring that idea. When he gradually discovered that Jesus had a different idea, instead of adjusting his own and trusting in Christ, he made an idol of his own idea and crushed Christ. Here is the essence of every sin and the opposite of authentic friendship: independence and a stubborn attachment to doing things our way or no way, as if we were God. Jesus offers us his friendship, but it is friendship with God. Accepting it means letting God be God. Judas refused. Whenever we sin, in big things or small, we echo the ancient, hellish, and foolish rebel's cry: "I will not serve!" (Jer 2:20).

RESPOND

You alone give hope to the human soul. You have given me hope. Your sacrifice on Calvary and in every Mass links my heart to your divine heart. How much you must love me! How can you love me enough to willingly offer yourself as the lamb to be slaughtered in reparation and atonement for my sins? Touch my heart, Lord, and help me glimpse the light of your love...

How valiantly you defended this woman who loved you so deeply! Teach me to love truly. My love is weak, inconstant, partial. But your Holy Spirit is at work in my soul. I know that in you I can love as you love, and I know that loving as you love is the secret to the fulfillment and fruitfulness I long for. With the love of your heart, Lord, inflame my heart...

How many times have I betrayed you? How many times have I rebelled against your will? How foolish I am to prefer my petty, narrow, self-centered ideas to the pure, eternal wisdom of your will. Your will is full of your wisdom, as the ocean is full of water. Make your will my heart's only quest, my mind's one delight! My heart is restless until it rests in you...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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THE SWEET SCENT OF LOVE (JN 12:1–11)

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"An egg given during life for love of God is more profitable for eternity than a cathedral full of gold given after death." ~ST. ALBERT THE GREAT

READ: JOHN 12:1–11

Six days before the Passover, Jesus went to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom he had raised from the dead. They gave a dinner for him there; Martha waited on them and Lazarus was among those at table. Mary brought in a pound of very costly ointment, pure nard, and with it anointed the feet of Jesus, wiping them with her hair; the house was full of the scent of the ointment. Then Judas Iscariot—one of his disciples, the man who was to betray him—said, "Why wasn't this ointment sold for three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor?" He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he was in charge of the common fund and used to help himself to the contributions. So Jesus said, "Leave her alone; she had to keep this scent for the day of my burial. You have the poor with you always, you will not always have me." Meanwhile a large number of Jews heard that he was there and came not only on account of Jesus but also to see Lazarus whom he had raised from the dead. Then the chief priests decided to kill Lazarus as well, since it was on his account that many of the Jews were leaving them and believing in Jesus.

REFLECT

"Martha waited on them..."

MARTHA: *How can I describe to you that scene? Something new was in the Lord's eyes in those last days before his Passion. It was a new intensity, a new*

determination. Maybe “new” isn’t the right word—it was just more of what had always been there, more intensity, more determination, more attention, more love. And it spread to everyone around him. I will never forget watching him at dinner, surrounded by his apostles, with Mary, so content, sitting at his feet and the other guests unable to look away from him. He was like a glowing hearth that drew in and warmed everyone around him. His presence filled everyone with light and vigor and a freshness of life. What the aroma of Mary’s perfume was for our senses, Jesus had already been for our minds and hearts. Whenever I smelled perfume after that day, it reminded me of the gentle power of his presence, which since then has never left me. And I knew that just as the perfume filled the house with its sweet and delicious scent, just so the Lord’s life-giving presence was going to spread and fill every corner of history and the world.

RESPOND

Teach me to love you as I should, Lord. Turn me around—I don’t want to keep gazing in the mirror and worrying about what others think of me and how I can achieve more than them. I want to gaze at you, at your truth, at the beauty of your Kingdom. I want to care only about pouring out my life in your service, like Mary’s perfume, so that I can spread the fullness of life to those around me...

I wonder if I have it too easy, Lord. Maybe if my life were a bit less comfortable and pleasant I would more easily remember that I am here to fulfill a mission, not just to have a good time. You lived your life so intensely, focusing on your Father’s will and the mission he had given you. And that intensity, that focus, was the source of your joy and fruitfulness. Help me, Lord, to follow your example...

Lord Jesus, you have already given me so much, but I want to ask you to come anew into my life, to make me experience again the sweet aroma of your presence. I forget so easily, Lord. The troubles of life dull my faith and hope. I need you to come and dine with me, to let me sit at your feet and drink in your wisdom. I want to keep fighting for your Kingdom. Lord Jesus, give me strength...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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THE NEW COMMANDMENT (JN 13:21–38)

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"But he was not satisfied with giving us all these beautiful things. He went to such lengths to win our love that he gave himself wholly to us. The Eternal Father gave us even his only Son." ~ST. ALPHONSUS LIGUORI

READ: JOHN 13:21–38

Having said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and declared, "I tell you most solemnly, **H**one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, wondering which he meant. The disciple Jesus loved was reclining next to Jesus; Simon Peter signed to him and said, "Ask who it is he means," so leaning back on Jesus' breast he said, "Who is it, Lord?" "It is the one," replied Jesus, "to whom I give the piece of bread that I shall dip in the dish." He dipped the piece of bread and gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. At that instant, after Judas had taken the bread, Satan entered him. Jesus then said, "What you are going to do, do quickly." None of the others at table understood the reason he said this. Since Judas had charge of the common fund, some of them thought Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the festival," or telling him to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the piece of bread he went out. Night had fallen. When he had gone Jesus said: "Now has the Son of Man been glorified, and in him God has been glorified. If God has been glorified in him, God will in turn glorify him in himself, and will glorify him very soon. My little children, I shall not be with you much longer. You will look for me, and, as I told the Jews, where I am going, you cannot come. I give you a new commandment: love one another; just as I have loved you, you also must love one another. By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples." Simon Peter said, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus replied, "Where I am going you cannot follow me now; you will follow me later." Peter said to him, "Why can't I follow

you now? I will lay down my life for you.” “Lay down your life for me?” answered Jesus. “I tell you most solemnly, before the cock crows you will have disowned me three times.”

REFLECT

If we value our friendship with Christ, we will try to please him, make him happy, and stay close to him. And he (unlike many human friends) is able to tell us exactly how to do that. If we love him, we will keep his command, and his command is for us to love one another, to put our lives at the service of those around us, just as he did for us. It is the touchstone of the Christian: “By this...everyone will know that you are my disciples.” Without it, no matter how much theology we may know, no matter how good we may be at winning arguments, no matter how many awards we may win—without learning to love as Christ has loved, we simply cannot consider ourselves his friends.

When Judas left Christ to betray him, St. John tells us that “night had fallen.” It is the counterpoint to Christ’s insistent self-appellation throughout the Gospel that he is the light of the world and that whoever heeds his word will not walk in darkness. Only friendship with Christ illuminates the meaning of the human condition and the path to human happiness. To reject this friendship is to willingly plunge into the darkness.

JESUS: I was looking ahead to my sufferings. They loomed over me. Yet I wanted them because I wanted to glorify the Father; I wanted to show forth his goodness. I wanted them, too, because of you. They would rebuild the bridge between God and man, a bridge that you could then walk across into my Kingdom. If only you knew how ardent my love for you is! That is what I wanted to show you. Let me show you. Open your mind to see the intensity of my love reflected in the intensity of my suffering.

RESPOND

Teach me to do your will, Lord. What more could I desire than for your goodness to shine through my life? Your will is love and wisdom. Your will is my salvation, fulfillment, and happiness. I have only to follow your example, the teachings of your Church, and your voice in my conscience. Make your will the whole quest of my heart...

Mary, you knew all the apostles, including Judas. Why was Satan able to enter into him? I want to know. I don’t trust myself. I don’t want to betray Christ. Maybe I should ask instead why the others, who also abandoned him, were able to come back to him.

They fell because of weakness, but Judas initiated his own rebellion. Mother, save me both from weakness and from pride...

Father, you sent us your Son so that we would not have to stumble in the darkness anymore. Yet so many people continue to reject him, and so many others have never known him. Move their hearts, Lord. Send out messengers—convinced, courageous, determined messengers. Send me. Reach into the hearts of those around me through my words, actions, and prayers...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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THE TASTE OF LOVE (MT 26:17–35)

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"I am the same under each of the species, but not every soul receives me with the same living faith as you do, my daughter, and therefore I cannot act in their souls as I do in yours."

~WORDS OF JESUS TO ST. FAUSTINA KOWALSKA

READ: MATTHEW 26:17–35

Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus to say, "Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the passover?" "Go to so-and-so in the city," he replied, "and say to him, The Master says: My time is near. It is at your house that I am keeping Passover with my disciples." The disciples did what Jesus told them and prepared the Passover. When evening came he was at table with the twelve disciples. And while they were eating he said, "I tell you solemnly, one of you is about to betray me." They were greatly distressed and started asking him in turn, "Not I, Lord, surely?" He answered, "Someone who has dipped his hand into the dish with me, will betray me. The Son of Man is going to his fate, as the scriptures say he will, but alas for that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! Better for that man if he had never been born!" Judas, who was to betray him; asked in his turn, "Not I, Rabbi, surely?" "They are your own words," answered Jesus.

Now as they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and when he had said the blessing he broke it and gave it to the disciples. "Take it and eat," he said, "this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had returned thanks he gave it to them. "Drink all of you from this," he said, "for this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, which is to be poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. From now on, I tell you, I shall not drink wine until the day I drink the new wine with you in the kingdom of my Father." After

psalms had been sung they left for the Mount of Olives. Then Jesus said to them, "You will all lose faith in me this night, for the scripture says: I shall strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered, but after my resurrection I shall go before you to Galilee." At this, Peter said, "Though all lose faith in you, I will never lose faith." Jesus answered him, "I tell you solemnly, this very night, before the cock crows, you will have disowned me three times." Peter said to him, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the disciples said the same.

REFLECT

When Jesus and his disciples celebrate this first Eucharist, the New Covenant is established. In the biblical context, a covenant is a family bond, a mutual commitment that links two parties so that they become one thing. Marriage, for example, is a covenant. God's promise to Abraham is a covenant. In establishing a New Covenant, Jesus abrogates the Mosaic Covenant, which was written on stone tablets, and fulfills Jeremiah's prophecy that after Israel's infidelity to the Old Covenant, God would make a new one—deeper, everlasting, and written on his people's hearts (Jer 31:31). How curious it is that St. Matthew locates the establishment of this everlasting covenant right between two predictions of betrayal, Judas' and Peter's. Jesus is willing to commit himself to us, body and soul; he offers us his undying fidelity, even knowing we will betray him. When he predicts the betrayals, we can hear the sadness in his voice; dipping into the same dish was a sign of close friendship, and that is how he describes his betrayer, as someone close to him, someone trusted by him. And yet, he wants his disciples to realize that he knows what will happen, so that later they will reflect on it, seeing that he loves them no matter what, even knowing their weakness. He wants to remove even the last speck of doubt from our hearts: in Christ we have found an undying, untiring love, the firmest of anchors in the stormy sea of life.

RESPOND

Will I abandon you too, Lord? You know that I already have. So many times I have failed to trust you, I have ignored your voice speaking in the depths of my soul. I am weak, Lord, and I am inconsistent. Be my rock; be my shield! With the fortitude of your heart, strengthen my heart...

Your generosity humbles me, Lord! Do I deserve the great gift you give me in the Eucharist? Do I deserve the forgiveness you offer me, even before I am aware of all

my sins? Do I deserve your friendship, which you promise never to take back, even if I betray you? Do I deserve to be permitted just to speak your holy name, the name which says everything? Jesus: God saves. Lord Jesus, have mercy on me...

I cannot receive you in the Blessed Sacrament right now, but at least come into my heart...Come to me, my Lord, and make me like you. You give without counting the cost. You love and forgive without ever demanding your rights. I am so slow to give, so reluctant to forgive. But I know that with you I can do all things. Jesus, I trust in you...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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EVENING MASS OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

THE FINAL LESSON (JN 13:1-20)

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"Consider well,' he says to us, 'that in loving I was first. You had not yet come forth into the light, not even the world itself had come into existence, when already I was loving you. Throughout my eternal existence I have loved you.'"

~ST. ALPHONSUS LIGUORI

READ: JOHN 13:1-20

*I*t was before the festival of the Passover, and Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to pass from this world to the Father. He had always loved those who were his in the world, but now he showed how perfect his love was. They were at supper, and the devil had already put it into the mind of Judas Iscariot son of Simon, to betray him. Jesus knew that the Father had put everything into his hands, and that he had come from God and was returning to God, and he got up from table, removed his outer garment and, taking a towel, wrapped it round his waist; he then poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel he was wearing. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "At the moment you do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand." "Never!" said Peter. "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus replied, "If I do not wash you, you can have nothing in common with me." "Then, Lord," said Simon Peter, "not only my feet, but my hands and my head as well!" Jesus said, "No one who has taken a bath needs washing, he is clean all over. You too are clean, though not all of you are." He knew who was going to betray him, that was why he said, "Though not all of you are."

When he had washed their feet and put on his clothes again he went back to the table. "Do you understand," he said, "what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord, and rightly; so I am. If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you should wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you. I tell you most solemnly, no servant is greater than his master, no messenger is greater than the man who sent him. Now that you know this, happiness will be yours if you behave accordingly. I am not speaking about all of you: I know the ones I have chosen; but what scripture says must be fulfilled: Someone who shares my table rebels against me. I tell you this now, before it happens, so that when it does happen you may believe that I am He. I tell you most solemnly, whoever welcomes the one I send welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

REFLECT

Judas was still at the Last Supper at this point. He had already decided to follow through with his plan of betrayal, but he had not yet left to set it in motion. What was in Jesus' mind when he came to Judas, poured water over his feet, and began to wash them? As Jesus finished drying Judas' feet with the towel, and as he laced up the sandals again, he looked into Judas's face and caught his eye. Jesus hadn't given up on him. Jesus never gives up on us; he is the ever-faithful friend. The tragedy is that we are the ones who sometimes give up on him.

JUDAS: *I was more disgusted than ever at this repellent display of weakness. It confirmed yet again all my suspicions: this man had not come to restore Israel to its glory, but to enervate it and despoil it. I wanted nothing to do with such an imposter, such a weak dreamer. I have to admit, though, that when he looked up at me—well, it made me think of the first time we had met, when I heard him speaking in the Temple and my heart surged with hope. He had looked at me then too, and I seemed to see in his eyes all the strength and wisdom and life that I knew existed somewhere but hadn't been able to find. He invited me to come with him then, and I couldn't resist. I had never been moved like that before. And then there were the miracles, and the huge crowds, and his mastery over the Pharisees. It was all so promising, and I could even taste victory just around the corner. But he never took the final step. And then he started talking about the cross.*

The others ignored it, but I knew he was serious. And how could a crucified rabbi be the Messiah? How could weakness reclaim our glory? That last night, for a split second after he replaced my sandals, it occurred to me that maybe there was more to it than I understood. But then I looked at him again, wrapped in that towel like a slave, washing my feet. It was repugnant. Peter was right—who would ever let a real Messiah sink so low as to wash our feet? But Peter was weak too; he caved in. I could never serve a Lord like that.

RESPOND

I glory in being able to call you Lord. I know that there is order in the universe. I know that my life has purpose. I know that the world is safe in your hands and history is marching forward according to a law of hidden progress, surely guided by your invincible Providence. Jesus, my Lord, my Master! Here is my life. I put it at your feet and at your service. I offer myself to you...

So many items are on my to-do list. I have so many plans and hopes. I want to do so much for you, Lord. But in the midst of my programs and activities, I too often forget about the only law of your Kingdom: I am to wash my neighbors' feet. Only there will I ever find the happiness you intend for me. I must learn self-forgetful love. And each day you provide so many chances for me to give myself in this way! Give me courage...

You have washed my feet so often, Lord. Every time I go to confession, you humble yourself and wash my feet. Thank you for washing Judas's feet. I am like Judas. Have I not betrayed you at times? You knew I would; you knew my heart as you washed my feet. A Judas is within me; don't let me forget. As soon as I forget it, I will follow his example. Make me faithful, Lord; never let me be separated from you, never...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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GOOD FRIDAY

THE POLITICIAN TEMPTATION (JN 18:12–27)

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“Behold, God the Father has sent down to earth as it were a bag filled with his mercy; a bag to be rent open in the passion so that our ransom which it concealed might be poured out; a small bag indeed, but full.”

~ST. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

READ: JOHN 18:12–27

The cohort and its captain and the Jewish guards seized Jesus and bound him. They took him first to Annas, because Annas was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. It was Caiaphas who had suggested to the Jews, “It is better for one man to die for the people.” Simon Peter, with another disciple, followed Jesus. This disciple, who was known to the high priest, went with Jesus into the high priest’s palace, but Peter stayed outside the door. So the other disciple, the one known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who was keeping the door and brought Peter in. The maid on duty at the door said to Peter, “Aren’t you another of that man’s disciples?” He answered, “I am not.” Now it was cold, and the servants and guards had lit a charcoal fire and were standing there warming themselves; so Peter stood there too, warming himself with the others. The high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. Jesus answered, “I have spoken openly for all the world to hear; I have always taught in the synagogue and in the Temple where all the Jews meet together: I have said nothing in secret. But why ask me? Ask my hearers what I taught: they know what I said.” At these words, one of the guards standing by gave Jesus a slap in the face, saying, “Is that the way to answer the high priest?” Jesus replied, “If there is something wrong in what I said, point it out; but if there is no offence in it, why do you strike me?”

Then Annas sent him, still bound, to Caiaphas the high priest. As Simon Peter stood there warming himself, someone said to him, "Aren't you another of his disciples?" He denied it saying, "I am not." One of the high priest's servants, a relation of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, said, "Didn't I see you in the garden with him?" Again Peter denied it; and at once a cock crew.

REFLECT

PETER: *After that night, for the rest of my life, people who didn't believe in Christ mocked me by imitating a cock crowing when I would walk into a room. At first it galled me. I always hated being made fun of. But as the years passed, I was glad of it. That night was the greatest night of my life. For the first time, I discovered that someone loved me, not because of what I could do for them or because I was so full of lovable traits, but simply because I was me. Jesus knew all along that I was too weak to follow him and fulfill my mission by leaning just on my own natural strength. But I didn't know it. I thought I could earn the honor he showed me by choosing me and inviting me to be his friend and build his Kingdom. How wrong I was! Who can earn honor from God? God is the one who confers honor. That night shattered once and for all the arrogance I had cultivated my whole life long. It taught me the most valuable lesson of all: when I am weak, then I am strong, because I have to lean on the strength of the Lord.*

RESPOND

I am sorry for the times I cut corners on my conscience. My heart is still divided, Lord. I am your disciple, but I still seek the benefits of other kingdoms in addition to yours. I know that my life will never bear the fruit you and I both want it to bear until I seek first and uncompromisingly your Kingdom in all that I do. Purify my heart, Lord. Make me strong; give me courage...

I have so much trouble controlling my emotional reactions, Lord. I want to contemplate your composure, your inner strength, the balance and harmony and peace that flow from having your heart entirely engaged in your Father's will. I know that you can teach me to arrange the sail of my fidelity just right, so the wind of every emotion will drive me further into your Kingdom...

Why am I afraid of failing, Lord? You failed in the eyes of the world. Peter failed.

The other apostles failed. Can my successes increase your love for me? Can my failures decrease it? The only reason I fear failure is because I value my own achievements too much. O Lord, what good are my achievements if they flow from fear and not from love? Teach me to love, Lord, to live from your love...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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HOLY SATURDAY

IRREVERSIBLE VICTORY (MK 16:1–8)

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“The path of each single Christian, like that of the Church as a whole, leads to new life, to eternal life, through the imitation of Christ and the experience of his cross.” ~Pope Benedict XVI

READ: MARK 16:1–8

When the sabbath was over, Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices with which to go and anoint him. And very early in the morning on the first day of the week they went to the tomb, just as the sun was rising. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” But when they looked they could see that the stone—which was very big—had already been rolled back. On entering the tomb they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right-hand side, and they were struck with amazement. But he said to them, “There is no need for alarm. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified: he has risen, he is not here. See, here is the place where they laid him. But you must go and tell his disciples and Peter, He is going before you to Galilee; it is there you will see him, just as he told you.” And the women came out and ran away from the tomb because they were frightened out of their wits; and they said nothing to a soul, for they were afraid.

REFLECT

The women who came to finish anointing Christ’s body came out of sheer love. He had become everything for them. We know from other Gospel passages that he had saved

them from horrible sins and great suffering, and they had come to know him as their hope and their sustenance. Now they sought him—even in his death—because they loved him, and their love could not stop seeking him.

JESUS: *I rewarded their love. The huge boulder that sealed my tomb symbolizes sin, the efficient cause of my crucifixion and the primary obstacle separating the human heart from my friendship, which every heart desires so anxiously. When these women pursued me out of love, I myself had the boulder removed; whenever you search for me out of love, or even out of a sincere desire to love, I remove the obstacles that inhibit you from entering into intimate communion with me. All I need is for you to truly want to love; I will do all the rest. The message of my resurrection is that love is stronger than death. If you love me, I will conquer your sin; if you seek me, you will find me; if you come to me, as I am already drawing your hearts towards me, I will come to you and share my joy with you.*

RESPOND

Sometimes little doubts creep into my mind, Lord. The logic of this world seems so convincing at times. But you have conquered this world; your wisdom rules it and will bring it to an end. You made me for something greater, greater even than the many beautiful pleasures of earthly life. Teach me to enjoy this life but to store up my treasures in heaven...

Clear my mind of all the false promises consumerism makes, all those illusions of pure happiness on earth that clog my faith. You have revealed the rhythm of life. Help me to find your presence and your will in all my Good Fridays and in all my Easter Sundays. May I desire Mt. Calvary as much as Mt. Tabor. Make me a true Christian. Teach me to perceive, embrace, and accomplish your will...

I want to love you as you ought to be loved. I want to love you so much that your angels roll away the stones that block out your light from thousands of hearts. Make me a channel of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me bring love, and where there is darkness, pour out your light through me...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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EASTER SUNDAY

THE NEW HAS COME (MT 28:1–10)

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“Eternal life is the perfect fulfillment of desire; inasmuch as each of the blessed will have more than he desired or hoped for.” ~ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

READ: MATTHEW 28:1–10

*A*fter the sabbath, and towards dawn on the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala and the other Mary went to visit the sepulchre. And all at once there was a violent earthquake, for the angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled away the stone and sat on it. His face was like lightning, his robe white as snow. The guards were so shaken, so frightened of him, that they were like dead men. But the angel spoke; and he said to the women, “There is no need for you to be afraid. I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said he would. Come and see the place where he lay, then go quickly and tell his disciples, He has risen from the dead and now he is going before you to Galilee; it is there you will see him. Now I have told you.” Filled with awe and great joy the women came quickly away from the tomb and ran to tell the disciples. And there, coming to meet them, was Jesus. “Greetings,” he said. And the women came up to him and, falling down before him, clasped his feet. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers that they must leave for Galilee; they will see me there.”

REFLECT

For the first time in St. Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus calls his apostles “my brothers.” This marks a qualitative leap in their relationship with the Lord. Now that they have partaken

of the Eucharist, they have Christ's own life within them; they are the first fruits of the New Covenant.

In Christ, we are no longer merely members of a chosen people, as in the Old Covenant, but we are sons with the Son; we are children of God's family; members of the household of God. Christ's restoration of communion between man and God has actually elevated man's dignity. This is why we sing on the Easter Vigil, "O Happy fault [the sin of Adam] that won for us so great a Redeemer!" As St. Augustine explained as the mighty Roman Empire was crumbling all around him, God only permits evil because in his wisdom, goodness, and omnipotence, he can bring an even greater good out of it. What a friend we have in Jesus!

RESPOND

You have been faithful unto death, Lord—death on a cross. And you have risen on the third day, just as you predicted. I believe in you. I put all my hopes in you. I thank you for the gift of faith. I thank you for your saving sacrifice and resurrection. You have promised to prepare a place for me in heaven —my own place in your household. Make me worthy of your promises, Lord...

Many people are slow to believe and obey—slower even than myself. I can help them. If my life is a mirror of your love, if my words are always worthy of you, then through me, as through the angel, you will roll away the stones that block so many hearts from receiving your grace. Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will...

Mary, how blessed was your reunion with Jesus! He is faithful, and he rewarded your fidelity. Mother, pray for me and for all Christians, that our hearts will overflow with the hope, the courage, the assurance that only Christ can give. Cause of our joy, pray for us...

CLOSING PRAYER: Prayer of St. Francis

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MY NOTES