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The Imitation of Christ

**The Contemporary
Translation by
William C. Creasy
with a Spiritual
Commentary by
Dennis Billy, C.Ss.R.**

Thomas à Kempis

THE

IMITATION OF CHRIST

THOMAS À KEMPIS

A Spiritual Commentary and Reader's Guide

Dennis J. Billy, C.Ss.R

Christian Classics  *Notre Dame, IN*

Thomas à Kempis. *The Imitation of Christ: A Spiritual Commentary and Reader's Guide* © 2005 by Ave Maria Press, Inc.

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www.christian-classics.com

International Standard Book Number: 0-87061-234-4

Text design by Brian C. Conley

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

*In memory of
Msgr. William L. Nolan
“Father Bill”
(1916–2000)*

*“If a man wishes to come after me,
he must deny his very self,
take up his cross,
and follow in my steps.”
Mark 8:34*

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Introduction

Ever since its appearance in the early fifteenth century, *The Imitation of Christ*¹ has enjoyed a wide reading audience. After the Bible, it is commonly referred to as the most widely read book in all of Christian literature. Although doubts about the identity of its author remain, most scholars agree that it was probably written by Thomas à Kempis (c. 1379–1471), a canon regular at the monastery of Mt. St. Agnes, northeast of Zwolle in present day Holland. They also recognize it as one of the finest expressions of the movement of late medieval piety and devotion known as the *Devotio moderna*.

Inspired by the evangelical preaching of Master Gerard Groote (1340–84) and profoundly influenced by the spirituality of the Rhineland mystic, John Ruysbroeck (1293–1381), the “Modern Devotion” was noted for its practical focus on “living in Christ, reading Scripture, progressing in moral sanctity, and developing interiority.”² One of its finest expressions of this movement was the “Brothers of the Common Life,” a loosely organized group of priests and laity, who lived in community, led popular missions, and wrote great numbers of books and tracts of popular devotion.³

Suspicious of the subtle distinctions and over-intellectualized atmosphere of late medieval scholasticism, the brothers ran their own schools that focused on instilling a well-rounded, humanist education and where Christian piety was at the center and not on the periphery of their students' lives. Noted for their emphasis on living out the practical dimensions of one's Christian calling, these schools would greatly influence the spiritual and intellectual life of northern Europe for centuries to come.⁴

Thomas à Kempis was educated in the local grammar school in his hometown of Kempen and, at the age of thirteen, joined his older brother John to continue his education with the Brothers of the Common Life at their monastery school at Deventer in the diocese of Utrecht. In 1399, he entered Mt. St. Agnes, a contemplative branch of the order that followed the rule of St. Augustine and where his older brother John had recently been installed as Prior. At the monastery, Thomas led the life of a quiet religious. Professed in 1406 and ordained to the priesthood in 1413, he was the chronicler of the monastery and spent much of his time copying the Scriptures and other liturgical books for use at the monastery. He was elected sub-prior in 1425 and is known to have authored a number of biographies and books of pious devotion. His greatest work, *The Imitation of Christ*, was probably written in the period shortly

before and after his priestly ordination.⁵

The Imitation has been described as “a philosophy of Light and of Life.”⁶ Written in a simple yet attractive Latin style, it steers clear of needless speculation so characteristic of the intellectual climate of the day and focuses instead on the practical exigencies of leading a holy life in a world beset by trials and constant temptations. In doing so, it seeks to mend the rift between learning and devotion that had entrenched itself in the mindset of late-medieval Catholicism and which would haunt western theology for centuries. The result is a healthy appreciation of learning in the service of Christian virtue and a deep suspicion of the rarified intellectual debates promulgated in the universities of the time. Its occasional ranting against the academic life should be understood in the context of the environment it was reacting against and judged in the light of its deep respect for learning as a vehicle for growth in the virtues and deepening one’s relationship with Christ. Although the great breadth of Thomas’s learning is in evidence on nearly every page of this great “Summa of Spirituality” (*summa spiritualitatis*),⁷ such knowledge is clearly used in the service of the Gospel and with the primary aim of deepening the reader’s faith.

Written by a religious, with the other members of his community for his primary audience, the work exhibits

many of the characteristics of late medieval religious piety and devotion. The work is divided into four books, respectively entitled: “Useful Reminders for the Spiritual Life” (Book One), “Suggestions Drawing One toward the Inner Life” (Book Two), “Of Inner Comfort” (Book Three), and “The Book on the Sacrament” (Book Four). In them, Thomas develops for his readers the practical implications of the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways. One author describes Thomas’s intentions in this way: “This life consists in the practice of the Christian virtues; the practice of the Christian virtues leads up to union with Christ; and union with Christ is consummated in the Holy Eucharist.”⁸ The eucharist, for Thomas, represents the culmination of the believer’s spiritual journey. It subsumes the preceding stages of the spiritual life into itself and points to that final consummation when time itself will pass into eternity and we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. This eschatological dimension of *The Imitation* permeates Thomas’ entire discourse and comes most vividly to the fore when he emphasizes the importance of keeping our eyes on the one thing that matters—our intimate relationship with the Lord.

In keeping with the practical aims of the *Devotio moderna*, *The Imitation* offers the reader a series of meditations on different aspects of the spiritual life. Each book is divided into a series of brief chapters, each of

which focuses on a significant theme relevant to the living out of the gospel in the daily life of the reader. The predominance of material found in Book Three on “Inner Comfort” (fifty-nine chapters—more than the other three books combined), suggests that Thomas has a mature audience in mind, one that has already made great strides in fostering the interior life. The sufficient amount of repetition in the work, along with a sizable amount of space allocated to the other stages of spiritual growth, however, suggests a deep consciousness of the dynamic connections in the whole spiritual enterprise. For Thomas, the authentic “imitation of Christ” involves the deep interpenetration of the “way of conversion” (i.e., purgation), “the way of wisdom” (i.e., illumination), and “the way of communion” (union). The closer one gets to God, the more one discovers one’s own sinfulness and need for conversion. “Resting in God,” for him, involves an ongoing process of “confession,” “holy learning,” and “interior devotion.” The book serves as an instrument for nurturing each of these dimensions of the spiritual life of the reader. Its chapters are not meant to be read in rapid succession, but pondered during long periods of quiet reflection so that the text’s spiritual message can penetrate the heart and mind of the reader. When seen in this light, the proper approach to reading the book more closely resembles the monastic practice of *lectio divina* than the finely tuned syllogistic reasoning of scholastic

dialectic.

As stated earlier, the authorship of *The Imitation* is normally (albeit not universally) attributed to Thomas à Kempis. Over the years, the work has been attributed to no less than forty authors.⁹ Although a strong case for Thomas' authorship can be made on the basis on internal and external evidence,¹⁰ the question has still not been definitively resolved. Part of the problem comes from the fact that it was first circulated anonymously and that doubts about its authorship go as far back as 1500.¹¹ Questions about the work's authorship, however, should not overshadow the substance of its message. In the author's own words: "We should read devout and simple books as willingly as we read those that are lofty and profound. Do not let the writer's authority or learning influence you, be it little or great, but let the love of pure truth attract you to read. Do not ask, 'Who said this?' but pay attention to what is said."¹² Many, over the years, have paid close attention to the words of *The Imitation*: Thomas More, Ignatius Loyola, Francis De Sales, Alphonsus de Liguori, to name but a few. The work survives in some 750 manuscripts, underwent 50 editions before 1500 and some 3,000 editions from its original printed version to the dawn of the twentieth century. Part of it (Book Four) appeared in English in 1503; the first of many complete translations in that language came out in

1556. Others will surely follow.¹³

Although its popularity has dwindled in recent years — especially with the fundamental shift in Christian spirituality that began with the work of the Second Vatican Council—*The Imitation of Christ* commands respect even to this day as a fundamental point of reference for those wishing to conform their lives more deeply to the person of Christ and his message. The present edition, based on the critical English translation of William C. Creasy, seeks to plumb the depths of this widely acclaimed classic of western spirituality and retrieve its hidden treasures for yet another generation of searching pilgrims.

Dennis J. Billy, C.SS.R.

Notes

1. The text used in this study comes from Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. William C. Creasy (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1989: reprint edition, 2004).
2. John Van Engen, “Introduction” in *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, trans. John Van Engen (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1988), 27.
3. Karl Bihlmeyer, *Church History*, revised by Hermann Tüchle, vol. 2, *The Middle Ages* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1963), 454.

4. Ibid.
5. Most of the bibliographical data in this paragraph comes from Leo Sherley-Price, “Introduction” in Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (Harmondsworth, England/New York: Penguin, 1952; reprint 1980), 20–23.
6. Brother Azarias, *The Culture of the Spiritual Sense* (New York: Steigel & Co., 1884). Cited in Sherley-Price, “Introduction,” 13.
7. Otto Gründler, “Devotio Moderna,” in *Christian Spirituality II: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Raitt in collaboration with Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 183.
8. Azarias, *The Culture of the Spiritual Sense* (New York: Steigel & Co., 1884). Cited in Sherley-Price, “Introduction,” 13.
9. Van Engen, “Introduction,” 8.
10. Sherley-Price, “Introduction,” 23–25.
11. Van Engen, “Introduction,” 8.
12. Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. William C. Creasy, Book I, Chapter 5 (p. 35). See also Sherley-Price, “Introduction,” 23.
13. The information concerning the various editions of *The Imitation* comes from Van Engen, “Introduction,” 8.

How to Read *The Imitation of Christ*

The Imitation of Christ is primarily a book of meditations. Its purpose is not to impart abstract *knowledge about* God, but to lead us into an *experience of* God. It does so by offering a series of self-contained reflections, each of which can be read in a single sitting and reflected upon in the quiet of one's heart. That is not to say that the chapters themselves are not connected to one another or that there is no clear progression from one book to the next. The author considers his material so important for growth in the spiritual life that he presents it in small doses so that we can thoroughly digest its meaning. In doing so, he gives us a book that can accompany us at every point of our spiritual journey.

As mentioned in the historical introduction to this volume, we should approach the work with a contemplative heart, one that closely resembles the ruminating movement of reading, reflection, rest, and response so typical of the monastic practice of *lectio divina*.¹ When reading *The Imitation*, we should focus on a single chapter at a time, ponder it, allow it to sink into our hearts, and follow what our hearts tell us. The

arrangement of Books I–III according to the purgative, illuminative, and unitive stages of spiritual growth allows us to open the book to that place which resonates closely with our present experience. The material in Book IV on the blessed sacrament, moreover, suggests the chapel as the most likely place for the meditative reading to occur, although other locations were also possible and perhaps even encouraged.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that a work written more than five hundred years ago, in a place and time very different from our own, can convey its message with the same freshness and intensity that so deeply touched its first generations of readers. The interior landscape of Christian spirituality has changed so much in the intervening centuries that today much of the book's contents seems distant and strange, as if it came from another world. Because it fails to engage our present sensitivities, many of us might be tempted not to take it very seriously or, worse yet, simply ignore it. Such a reaction is quite understandable and helps to explain the decline in the book's readership over the last thirty to forty years. This very difficulty, however, invites us to take a closer look at its pages. Could it be possible that a work that has helped generations of Christians to deepen their relationship with Christ has nothing to say to us today? Those of us who suspect this is true need to ask ourselves if our own sensitivities have been dulled to the

mysteries it seeks to reveal. Perhaps we are not reading it through the right lenses. Perhaps we do not know what to look for.

What follows are a series of “interpretive filters” or “lenses” that can help us to make sense out of *The Imitation* and find its relevance for our own lives. These “lenses” bring to the fore some of our most basic presuppositions about the nature of “life in the Spirit” and will help us to recognize the similarities and the dissimilarities between our world and that of *The Imitation*. They remind us, moreover, that our purpose in reading a book such as this is not to lose ourselves in a nostalgic re-creation of a distant (and ultimately irretrievable) medieval religious landscape, but to explore that past in order to find helpful insights for dealing with our present spiritual struggles. They encourage us to enter into a dialogue with the text and to become aware of our own feelings and judgments about the meaning of our spiritual journey. In doing so, we will doubtless find ourselves, at times, both questioning the teaching of *The Imitation* and being questioned by it. This dynamic relationship between the text and its reader touches the very heart of spiritual reading and is extremely important when dealing with a classic of spirituality such as *The Imitation*. For our present purposes, five of these “interpretive filters” or “lenses” are especially worth mentioning.

Filter One. To begin with, Thomas à Kempis (or someone very much like him) was a professed religious and wrote *The Imitation* with an audience of professed religious in mind. That is not to say that the book has no relevance for a specifically lay readership or that its insights into growth in the spiritual life have no validity beyond the walls of the religious cloister. On the contrary, the reason for its great success as a book of popular devotion over the years lay precisely in its ability to cultivate a reading audience from all states of life within the church—priestly, religious, as well as lay. It did so, however, by placing the religious state at the summit of a hierarchical order of sanctity and by making it the standard according to which other states of life had ultimately to conform. It adopted, in other words, the “two-tiered” understanding of holiness prevalent throughout the world of its day and which held great sway in the religious outlook of western Christianity right up to the dawn of the Second Vatican Council. According to this outlook, “the way of the commandments” comprises the basic call of all baptized Christians (especially the laity) and “the way of the counsels” that of a chosen elite (especially religious and clergy). Only recently has this deeply entrenched outlook begun to change. The documents of Vatican II recognize a unique way to God in each vocational state and steer clear of any undue hierarchical comparisons.² When reading *The*

Imitation, we should be conscious of both the audience for which it was originally intended and the understanding of holiness that supports its claims. We should also try to distill from its pages those points concerning growth in the Spirit and the walk of Christian discipleship that would be pertinent to our present situation. In this volume, the brief introduction to each chapter and the reflection questions that follow should be particularly helpful in this regard.

Filter Two. Another important point to consider throughout our reading of *The Imitation* is the extremely individualistic understanding of Christian piety and devotion that permeates its pages. This inward turn comes, in part, from forces at work within the *Devotio Moderna* that inspired the work and the commitment to the interior life that marks one of its chief characteristics. It was also due, in part, to the introverted spirit that had taken hold in medieval western Europe during the second half of the fourteenth and the early decades of the fifteenth centuries as a result of a series of deathly struggles against the Black Death. At the time *The Imitation* was written, western Europe was just recovering from this dreaded disease that deprived it of more than a third of its population. As a result (and understandably so), the focus of Christian spirituality was still very much on the nearness of death and the fleeting nature of earthly life. Only the Renaissance would lift

Europe's spirit and turn it away from its heavy focus on the inevitability of death. We should also remember that the author of *The Imitation* wrote within the context of a both a religious order and a spiritual movement that exalted life in community. Its strong individualistic strain represents a necessary balance the overall communal context in which both its author and audience lived out their lives. When reading the work, we should be conscious of the strong communal focus in much of present-day Christian spirituality, but not be afraid to nurture a rich interior life that a work such as *The Imitation* seeks to foster. In the end, the interior life is nurtured by the communal—and vice versa. It is not a question of choosing one over the other, but of finding an appropriate balance between individual and communal piety in our lives. When reading *The Imitation*, moreover, we should try not to be put off by its heavy and, at times, even morbid reflections on death. Conscious of at least some of the factors that caused it, we should be sympathetic toward the author's attempt to calm his reader's deepest fears and find in his words an invitation to ponder our own mortality. For many in today's world, the reality of war, natural disasters, and diseases such as AIDS have brought the threshold of death much closer to the surface of their thoughts and have made them conscious of how so much of their own culture sanitizes death by covering it over or moving it where it cannot be

seen. All human beings possess a fear of death. If we listen carefully to the teaching of *The Imitation*, it can help us plumb the depths of our own insecurities about the end of life.

Filter Three. The primary image of God as presented in *The Imitation* is that of the suffering Christ. The book's fundamental purpose is to help us by means of disciplined religious practices (both internal and external) to conform our lives to his. In doing so, we come to enjoy an intimate relationship with Christ and learn that our suffering in this life can ultimately be seen as an intimate participation in his own passion and death. Behind this image of the suffering Christ is an understanding of redemption that focuses on the compassion of God satisfying the demands of God's justice. According to this understanding of redemption, one that was originally developed by St. Anselm of Canterbury, d.1109), in Christ, God's infinite mercy pays the infinite price of Adam's primordial (i.e., original) transgression and satisfies the exacting demands of God's infinite justice. The cross plays a pivotal role in this presentation of redemption and thus becomes the primary concern of Christian spirituality. The imitation of Christ is thus closely tied up with following the way of the cross. By sharing in it, we give witness to our faith and, through the exercise of the Christian virtue of patience (from the Latin word *pati*, "to suffer"), can find meaning in even

the smallest trials of life. This strong link between Christ's redemptive suffering and the way of discipleship predates the writing of *The Imitation* and endures to the present day. Unlike past generations of Christians, however, many of today's believers have widened the scope of Christian spirituality by linking it to other (now deemed equally important) facets of Christ's redemptive mystery (e.g., the incarnation and the resurrection). Such a change of focus has brought about a fundamental shift in our understanding of Christian discipleship. While it still involves fostering an intimate relationship with Jesus, the imitation of Christ now seeks not only a deeper sharing in his suffering and death, but also in the many other qualities of Jesus' earthly and post-resurrectional life. Jesus is now looked upon as Emmanuel, "God with us," who accompanies us at every moment of our lives and who has given us his Spirit and its various gifts and fruits to nurture, comfort, and guide us. When reading *The Imitation* today, we should be aware of this fundamental shift in focus and always be asking ourselves in the back of our minds, "How do these particular understandings of Christ, redemption, and Christian discipleship relate to our own?" "How can they be understood in the light of the operative models that inform our current understanding of Christian discipleship?" How can the implications of *The Imitation's* teaching be translated into our present

circumstances?”

Filter Four. Although the fundamental understanding of the human person in *The Imitation* maintains the essential metaphysical unity of body and soul, its discourse and manner of speaking often exalts the soul at the expense of the body. In doing so, it introduces a subtle form of dualism in its spiritual outlook that permeates much of what it says about the nature of Christian discipleship and does not sit well with our current sensitivities. The author’s emphasis on disciplining the body and its unruly appetites manifests a latent distrust of the physical dimension of human existence and sometimes borders on the extreme. This underlying suspicion of the body and its desires goes back to Augustine’s formulation of the doctrine of original sin and its contention that Adam’s sin was transmitted from one generation to the next through the inordinate concupiscence (i.e., lust) that was present in every act of sexual intercourse. Coupled with this deep suspicion of the body is an even deeper wariness of human sexuality and the strong, often uncontrollable passions associated with it. When seen in this light, the book’s exaltation of the virtue of chastity represents as much a “turning away from” the inordinate passions of the body as an embrace of the intrinsic values of the kingdom— perhaps even more. Such suspicion and, at times, outright disdain of the corporeal dimension of

human existence does not sit well with today's approach to Christian spirituality, where an integrated understanding of the human person serves as a fundamental point of departure for a holistic presentation of the demands of Christian discipleship. When reading *The Imitation*, we should be aware of the subtle body/soul dualism present in its discourse and make appropriate adjustments to our present circumstances. At the same time, we need to take a long hard look at our own presuppositions and prejudices and ask ourselves if we have adopted too optimistic (perhaps even naive) a view toward our physical existence. If *The Imitation* can be faulted for introducing a subtle form of *dualism* into its presentation, perhaps we have gone to the opposite extreme of accepting a latent form of *monism* which collapses the spiritual into the physical and devalues the traditional warnings concerning "the dangers of the flesh." If this is so, then perhaps *The Imitation* can help us to examine our presuppositions about the spiritual life and enable us to find a suitable balance for our present circumstances.

Filter Five. Connected to this insight is *The Imitation's* strong, combative posture toward the world around us. The reasons for this attitude go deep into the roots of late-medieval European culture. Part of it has to do with an antagonistic understanding of the relationship between the sacred and the profane, a current that goes

back to the origins of Christianity itself. Another part of it concerns a deep suspicion of the material world and the temptations of the flesh, which manifested itself in a desire to flee from the influence of the world, lest it have an inordinate influence in the circumstances of daily life. Yet another reason looks to the philosophical and theological underpinnings which support a vision of reality where the “world of spirit” is constantly at war with the “world of the flesh.” All of these reasons (and many more) can help us to appreciate why the author of *The Imitation* presents the world in a considerably derogatory light. We must bear in mind, moreover, that the physical universe of *The Imitation* “while unimaginably large, was also unambiguously finite,”³ the perfect place for a cosmic drama between good and evil to act itself out. The understanding of the physical universe in *The Imitation* is very different from our own. As history has progressed, the respective influences of the so-called Copernican and Einsteinian revolutions have left indelible marks on the way we perceive the material world and our relationship to it.⁴ If that is not enough, theology now provides us with not one, but a variety of different models through which we can understand the relationship between Christ and culture. In addition to the Christ “against the world” posture promulgated in *The Imitation*, we now see that Christianity has, at times, identified itself with the world,

sought to rise above it, been in paradox with it, and even tried to transform it.⁵ As we read *The Imitation*, we need to be conscious of the attitude toward the world placed before us and ask some probing questions about how we ourselves are relating to the culture we are living in. Mature theological reflection, it has been said, involves the ongoing interplay of three fundamental ideals: God, humanity, and the world.⁶ Our reflection on *The Imitation* needs to take account of the world it inhabits and see if it has anything to offer our own.

These five “interpretive filters” or “lenses” can make us sensitive to both the similarities our world shares with that of *The Imitation*, as well as the differences. Through them, the task of reading such a text becomes not so much one of assimilating material from one world view to another (and trying to make it “fit”) as initiating a dialogue that will help us to explore our present understanding of Christian discipleship even more deeply. Our “imitation of Christ,” in other words, cannot be a mere replica of the one suggested by *The Imitation*, but will naturally embrace both general and distinctive traits that will make it continuous with it, yet also uniquely our own.

In the present volume, the text of *The Imitation* is couched in commentary that seeks to facilitate the kind of dialogue suggested above. A brief description of each

stage of the spiritual life (i.e., purgative, illuminative, unitive) introduces each book. Additional commentary places each chapter in an appropriate context and is followed by a brief series of questions meant to stimulate reflection on the present relevance of the particular topic under consideration. At the end, a general conclusion synthesizes the most significant points of the discussion and invites the reader to do the same. The reader is encouraged to use *The Imitation* as it was originally intended—a book of meditations. The clear demarcation between introduction, text, and reflection questions allows the reader do this either in the traditional way (i.e., by meditating only on the text itself) or by way of dialogue (i.e., by also incorporating the introductions and reflection questions into his or her meditation). Since a work such as *The Imitation of Christ* was written to be a person’s lifelong companion on the spiritual journey, it is sincerely hoped that the reader will find time to make use of both approaches. In this way, “both old and new” can be retrieved from this classic text of the western Christian tradition and hopefully put to appropriate and discerning use.

Dennis J. Billy, C.SS.R.

Notes

1. For more on *lectio divina*, see Jean Leclercq, *The Love*

of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 72–73. See also Michael Downey, *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), s. v. “*Lectio Divina*,” by Kevin W. Irwin.

2. See, for example, the Council’s teaching on “the universal call to holiness” in *Lumen gentium*, nos. 39–42.
3. See C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964; reprint ed., 1971), 99.
4. See Charles Van Doren, *A History of Knowledge: Past Present and Future* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 195–96, 211–12, 325–27.
5. See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951; Harper Colophon Books ed., 1975), 39–44.
6. See N. Max Wildiers, *The Theologian and His Universe: Theology and Cosmology from the Middle Ages to the Present* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1982), 1.

Book One

Useful Reminders for the Spiritual Life

Introduction

The first book of *The Imitation* consists of twenty-five short chapters on what Christian authors typically call “The Way of Purgation.” This beginning stage of the spiritual life encourages us to let go of those things that hinder us in our walk with the Lord. It points out the various temptations and undue attachments that keep us from growing in the life of the Spirit. The author does so by offering a series of concrete, practical suggestions (or “counsels”) that can help us to wean ourselves free of the “unclean spirits” and petty vices that prevent us from living a life of virtue. Although many of his suggestions would today appear inappropriate and out of place, the fundamental thrust of his teaching is right on target. Knowledge of self, caution toward the allurements of the world, a disciplined regiment of prayer, and reliance on God’s grace are necessary steps that each of us must take on our walk to Christian maturity.

Chapter One

Introduction

This opening chapter sets the tone for all that follows. To imitate Christ means to meditate on his life and to walk in his footsteps so that we can come to a deep personal knowledge of the divine. These words are very easy to say, but exceedingly difficult to put into practice. We are often more concerned about the pressing concerns of daily living than about the one thing that really matters—to love and serve the Lord. As a result, we never come to a deeper personal knowledge of Jesus himself. We may know a great deal about God, but really know very little of him. This chapter asks us to take a good look at the things that really matter to us. Are we following our own way or the Lord’s way? The author asks us to look into our hearts and determine where our affections really lie.

Of the Imitation of Christ

“Anyone who follows me shall not walk in darkness,” says the Lord. These are the words of Christ, and by them we are reminded that we must imitate his life and his ways if we are to be truly enlightened and set free from the darkness of our own hearts. Let it be the most important thing we do, then, to reflect on the life of Jesus Christ.

Christ’s teaching surpasses all the teachings of the saints, and the person who has his spirit will find hidden nourishment in his words. Yet, many people, even after hearing scripture read so often, lack a deep longing for it, for

they do not have the spirit of Christ. Anyone who wishes to understand Christ's words and to savor them fully should strive to become like him in every way.

What good does it do, then, to debate about the Trinity, if by a lack of humility you are displeasing to the Trinity? In truth, lofty words do not make a person holy and just, but a virtuous life makes one dear to God. I would much rather feel profound sorrow for my sins than be able to define the theological term for it. If you knew the whole Bible by heart and the sayings of all the philosophers, what good would it all be without God's love and grace? Vanity of vanities and all is vanity, except to love God and to serve only him. This is the highest wisdom: to see the world as it truly is, fallen and fleeting; to love the world not for its own sake, but for God's; and to direct all your effort toward achieving the kingdom of heaven.

So, it is vanity to seek material wealth that cannot last and to place your trust in it. It is also vanity to seek recognition and status. It is vanity to chase after what the world says you should want and to long for things you should not have, things that you will pay a high price for later on if you get them. It is vanity to wish for a long life and to care little about a good life. It is vanity to focus only on your present life and not to look ahead to your future life. It is vanity to live for the joys of the moment and not to seek eagerly the lasting joys that await you.

Often remember that saying: "The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor is the ear filled with hearing." Make every effort, then, to shift your affections from the things that you can see to the things you cannot see, for people who live in the world on its terms instead of on God's stain their conscience and lose God's grace.

Imitating Christ

1. What matters to you? What do you live for? What do

you place your trust in? How would you prioritize the various values in your life? Where does Christ fit in among them?

2. Do you have a strong desire to know and to love God personally? Has that desire increased or decreased over the years? What strengthens that desire? What weakens it?
3. What holds you back from loving and serving the Lord? What helps you? What can you do to free yourself from these difficulties? What can you do to be more attentive to the Lord in your daily life?

Chapter Two

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the importance of having accurate self-knowledge. It reminds us that everything we have is a gift from God and needs to be recognized as such. We should be careful not to think ourselves better than others just because we know a little more or think ourselves more talented. We should not be high-minded or condescending toward others. Humility, not pride, is a basic characteristic of Christ's followers. Being humble means recognizing the truth about ourselves. It helps us to acknowledge our weaknesses and own selfish tendencies. This chapter reminds us that self-knowledge is the key to wisdom. It warns us of the dangers of cutting

off intellectual knowledge from a virtuous life and a pure conscience. True self-understanding, it tells us, acknowledges one's utter dependency on God. With that knowledge, everything else falls gently into place.

Of Having a Humble Opinion about Yourself

Everyone naturally wishes to have knowledge, but what good is great learning unless it is accompanied by a feeling of deep awe and profound reverence toward God? Indeed, a humble farmer who serves God is better than a proud philosopher, who, neglecting himself, contemplates the course of the heavens. The person who truly knows himself seems common in his own eyes, and the good things that others may say about him do not change the way he thinks about himself. If I knew everything in the world and did not have love, what good would it do me before God, who will judge me by what I have done?

Calm that excessive thirst for knowledge, for there is great discord and deception in it. People who have great learning are often eager to appear wise, and they often wish others to recognize them as wise people. There are many things that you can know about, though, that are of little or no use to the soul, and a person is exceedingly foolish who reaches for anything that does not lead toward salvation. Endless reading and talk do not satisfy the soul, but a good life puts the mind at rest, and a clean conscience brings great confidence in God. The more you know and the better you know it, the greater is your responsibility for using your knowledge wisely.

So, do not think highly of yourself because of what you know about any art or science, but rather respect the knowledge that has been entrusted to you. If it seems to you that you know many things and that you are an expert in

them, recognize nevertheless that there are many things that you do not know. Do not be high-minded, but admit your great ignorance. Why do you wish to think yourself better than others when you discover many people more learned and more practiced in God's ways than you are? If you want to learn something that will really help you, learn to see yourself as God sees you and not as you see yourself in the distorted mirror of your own self-importance. This is the greatest and most useful lesson we can learn: to know ourselves for what we truly are, to admit freely our weaknesses and failings, and to hold a humble opinion of ourselves because of them. Not to dwell on ourselves and always to think well and highly of others is great wisdom and perfection.

If you should see another person sin openly or commit some grave wrong, still you should not think yourself a better person by comparison, for you do not know how long you may remain in a good state. We are all frail, but think no one more frail than yourself.

Imitating Christ

1. Are you a proud person, a humble person, or somewhere in-between? Do you consider yourself better than others, worse than others, or the same as others? Does your knowledge of yourself affect your dealings with others? If so, how so?
2. Are you in touch with your weaknesses? Do you know what they are? Do you ignore them? Try to hide them? Do you wish they would just simply go away? Does being in touch with your weaknesses make you more compassionate toward others? Does it make you feel more dependent on God?

3. Does the chapter's injunction that we have "a low estimate of ourselves" mean that we are to have a poor self-image? How would you explain the difference? If humility is truth, what do you consider to be the truth about yourself? Have you ever acknowledged this truth to God? If not, is there anything keeping you from doing so?

Chapter Three

Introduction

This chapter encourages us to drink from the fountain of truth itself. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6). He is the source of all genuine knowledge and wisdom. The chapter warns us of the danger of the pursuit of intellectual knowledge when it cuts itself off from virtuous living. The love of learning, though good in itself, can become an end itself, if it is not rooted in charity and a deep desire for holiness. The author of *The Imitation* wrote during a time when a rift existed between the intellectual circles of his day and the popular devotion of the faithful. To bridge this gap, he points to Jesus as the unifying factor of all human knowledge. Without him, no one understands anything correctly. With him, one grows in inner simplicity, walks the way of virtue, and bathes in the wisdom of God.

Of the Teaching of Truth

Happy is that person whom Truth itself teaches, not by figures of speech and eloquent language, but as it is itself. Our opinions and our understanding often lead us astray and offer us very little insight. What good is a brilliant argument about hidden and obscure matters when God does not judge us by our knowledge of such things? It is a great mistake for us to neglect useful and necessary things and to direct our thoughts to curious and harmful ones. Having eyes, we do not see. Why should we bother about clever arguments and subtle reasoning?

When the eternal Word speaks we are set free from countless theories and conjectures. All things spring from this one Word and all things speak of one Word, and this Word is the beginning, which also speaks to us. Without the Word, no one understands correctly or draws the right conclusions about anything. That person to whom all things are One and who draws all things to One and who sees all things in One may be steadfast in heart and rest peacefully in God.

O God, the Truth, make me one with you in endless love! I am often worn out by all that I read and hear; you are all that I want or desire. Let all teachers hold their peace. Let all creation be silent in your sight. You alone speak to me.

The more a person is at one with himself and inwardly undivided, the more varied and profound things does he understand without effort, for he receives the light of understanding from above. A pure, simple and steady spirit is not distracted by flitting about from one thing to another, for he does all things to the honor of God and tries in his heart to be free from all selfishness. What gets in your way and troubles you more than the undisciplined passions of your own heart? A good, devout person first arranges inwardly the things to be done outwardly. He does not let his passions get the best of him, but he subjects them to the

ruling of sound judgment. Who has a more fierce struggle than the person who strives to master himself? And this must be our occupation: to strive to master ourselves and daily to grow stronger and to advance from good to better.

All perfection in this life has some accompanying imperfection, and all our speculation is not without some darkening mist. A humble understanding of yourself is a surer way to God than a profound searching after knowledge. Knowledge is not to be blamed, nor is the simple understanding of anything which is good in itself and which is made to be so by God, but a good conscience and a virtuous life are always to be put first. Nevertheless, many people have chosen to seek knowledge rather than to live well, and they are often led astray and their lives come to very little—or nothing at all. Oh, if they would apply such diligence in rooting out vices and implanting virtues as they do in posing questions, there would not be so many evils and scandals among people, nor so much laxity in religious communities!

Surely, when the day of judgment comes we shall not be asked what we have read but what we have done, not how well we have spoken but how devoutly we have lived. Tell me, where are those professors and teachers today whom you knew so well while they were living and flourishing in their learning? Now other people hold their positions, and I do not know whether they ever think of them. While they lived they seemed to be important, and now no one mentions them. Oh, how swiftly the glory of the world passes away! If only their lives had been in harmony with their learning, then all their studying and reading would have been worthwhile. How many people perish in a generation through empty learning, caring little for the service of God? And because they prefer to be famous rather than humble, they perish with their own thoughts.

That person is truly great who has great love. He is truly great who is small in his own eyes and who regards every

pinnacle of honor as nothing in itself. He is truly wise who regards all earthly ambitions as supremely unimportant, if they stand in the way of gaining Christ. And he is very learned indeed who knows God's will and who makes it his own.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you have a positive or a negative attitude toward learning? Does it draw you closer to or lead you away from God? Does it have anything to do with Christ? How would you describe their connection?
2. Is there a rift between intellectual and popular culture in the society you live in? If so, how would you describe it? What are the greatest discrepancies? Does it have anything to do with intellectual pursuit and virtuous living?
3. Is there a rift between knowledge and holiness in your own life? If so, how would you describe it? Was it always that way? How far back does it go? What could be done to narrow the gap? Have you considered prayer?

Chapter Four

Introduction

This chapter reminds us of the importance of prudence in our daily lives. Imitating Christ means acting wisely and with due discretion in the daily circumstances of life. It means trying to see things the way God sees

them. All too often, we give in to our propensities for gossip and are willing to believe everything we hear. The author bids us to exercise caution and patience in all matters. We should be mindful of the words we say and the effect they have on others. We should be slow to judge others, wary about following our own opinions, and anxious to seek guidance from others. Prudence is a cardinal virtue. It helps us to find reasonable and appropriate means to achieving our ends. It makes us wise in the ways of the Lord and insures the proper functioning of the other virtues.

Of Thinking Before You Act

We should not trust every word that we hear or every feeling in our hearts; rather, we should bring such matters before God and carefully ponder them at our leisure. It is sad to say, but we are so weak that we are more ready to believe bad things about another person—and to spread them around—than we are to believe or to say something good about them. Those who strive to be perfect, though, are not so quick to believe everything that is said, because they understand human weakness, which is prone to evil and is slippery enough in words.

It is great wisdom not to be rash in our actions nor to persist stubbornly in our own opinions. What is more, it is wise not to believe everything you hear nor to be so eager to pass on rumors. Instead of following your own notions, consult someone who is wise and conscientious, and seek to be guided by one who is better than yourself. A good life makes a person wise in God's eyes and experienced in many things. The more humble and obedient one is to God, the greater

will be his wisdom and peace.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you often say things without thinking? Do your words strengthen and encourage people or discourage or belittle them? Do you think before you speak? Do you like to take part in gossip? Do you ever find yourself doing so unintentionally? What practical steps could you take to change such behavior?
2. Do you act with too much haste or too little? Are you stubborn or opinionated? Do you seek the advice of others before making important decisions? Do you seek such advice on smaller matters? Do you pray over such matters?
3. What does it mean to view things the way Christ sees them? Is it the same for everyone? Different? What does it mean to you? Have you ever felt you were doing so? How can you be sure you are seeing the way Christ sees?

Chapter Five

Introduction

This chapter reminds us that spiritual reading is important for anyone wishing to enjoy an intimate relationship with the Lord. It tells us to read the scriptures and other holy books not with the critical eyes of a scholar, but with the humility, simplicity, and faith of a

dedicated believer. When involved in spiritual reading, we should open our hearts to God and ask him to reveal the truth of his Word to our hearts. The author of the book or the style in which it was written should not matter to us. We should be concerned only with what the Lord is trying to say to our hearts. Scholarly investigation has its place, but can easily get in the way of our ability to listen to God's word. The scriptures, the fathers of the church, and the writings of the saints have much to tell us. To hear them properly, however, we need to foster in our hearts a spirit of quiet contemplation.

Of Reading of Holy Writings

Search for truth in holy writings, not eloquence. All holy writing should be read in the same spirit with which it was written. We should look for profit in the writings rather than for subtle expression. We should read devout and simple books as willingly as we read those that are lofty and profound. Do not let the writer's authority or learning influence you, be it little or great, but let the love of pure truth attract you to read. Do not ask, "Who said this?" but pay attention to what is said. People pass away, but the truth of the Lord endures forever. God speaks to us in many ways without considering a person's status.

Our curiosity often gets in our way when we try to study and understand those passages that are too difficult for us. We should simply pass over them. If you wish to profit from your reading, read with humility, simplicity and faith, and do not try to impress others with your great learning. Feel free to question, listen in silence to the words of the saints, and do not scoff at what the ancient writers have to say, for it is

not offered without cause.

Imitating Christ

1. What is your normal way of reading the scriptures? What motivates you? What do you look for? How much time do you give to it? Do you rush through it? Do you let your heart listen to the words you are reading? Do you pray over these words?
2. Do you put time aside for other kinds of spiritual reading? If so, what kinds of books do you read? Do you have your favorite authors, topics, or a favorite style of writing? Are the books you read of an older or more recent vintage? Have you read any of the fathers of the church?
3. The author warns his readers about the dangers of reading in order to earn a reputation for scholarship. What dangers concerning reading are appropriate for you? Do you read enough or too little? Are you a critical reader or not? When you read, do you search for truth or mere information? Do you ponder what you read? Do you do so out of love for God and a desire to grow in holiness?

Chapter Six

Introduction

This chapter draws a connection between peace of mind and the taming of our emotions. When left

unchecked, unruly passions will destroy our tranquility of soul and leave in its place nothing but restlessness and inner disquiet. When a passion runs its course and does not bring with it the desired contentment, a deep sense of remorse, even depression, sets in. Imitating Christ means resisting (not repressing) our unruly emotions so that they can be tamed and used in a good way. This process takes a great deal of time and patience—often a lifetime. As the ideas in this chapter suggest, the author of *The Imitation* wrote during a time when the emotions were regarded with great suspicion. A deep-seated effect of original sin, “inordinate concupiscence,” as our unruly passions were called, was a primary obstacle to conversion, especially in the initial purgative stage. His statements about the danger of such passions may seem too extreme for our present sensitivities. They caution us, however, about having a too positive evaluation of them and of the importance of being sensitive to the danger they can inflict.

Of Confused Feelings

Whenever a person becomes obsessed with success and material things, he quickly becomes restless. The proud and greedy never rest; the poor and humble in spirit rest in great peace. Anyone who is not completely free from the grip of his own vanity is easily tempted and is toppled by small, trifling things.

A person who is weak in spirit and who is still controlled by

his need to be important has great trouble dragging himself away from the things that most attract him in this world. Such a person is unhappy when he does restrain himself, yet his anger flares up if anyone stands in his way. What is more, if he does get what he wants, he is at once stricken by a heavy conscience because he has given in to his weakness. In no way does this lead to peace!

In resisting such temptations, then, does one find true peace of heart, not in being a slave to them. There is no peace in the heart of a slave, nor in someone who is driven to continually bustling about in the world. Only a spiritual person—a person aglow with God’s love—finds true peace.

Imitating Christ

1. Is your attitude toward your emotions positive, negative, or indifferent? Do you experience any of them as unruly or difficult to handle? How do you deal with them? What do you understand by the phrase “taming one’s emotions?”
2. Are you a restless person? Do you find it difficult to sit still? To be at rest? Have you ever had the experience of being at peace in your heart and then losing that peace? If so, what caused it? If so, has it happened often? What did you do to regain it?
3. Have you ever experienced remorse? Depression? If so, do you understand what brought it on? Does it happen often? Do you have ways of dealing with such moods? What practical things can you do to maintain true peace of heart?

Chapter Seven

Introduction

This chapter reminds us that God is our only true hope. It warns us not to think ourselves superior because of our status in life, the people we know, or the riches in our possession. We are to have confidence in God, the source of all good things, and do our best to nurture a sincere and humble attitude toward all. For the author, humility is one of the most basic virtues of Christian discipleship. It gives us perspective and helps us to avoid the threefold dangers of pride, presumption, and complacency. When we are humble, we recognize our utter dependence on God and recognize how frivolous it is to boast about our talents, health, strength, and beauty. It is God who provides us with such benefits, and it is God who sees through them and into our hearts. The world we live in is anything but humble. The virtue of humility promotes gospel values and, perhaps more than ever, offers a strong countercultural alternative to the spirit of the times.

Of Avoiding Empty Hope and Self-Praise

Anyone who places all his trust in people or in other created things is foolish. Do not be ashamed to serve others for the love of Jesus Christ and to appear poor in this world. Do not rely on yourself, but place all your trust in God. Do what you can, and God will bless your good intentions. Do not trust in

your own knowledge nor in anyone else's cleverness; rather, trust in the grace of God, who helps the humble and humbles the proud.

Do not take pride in your possessions, if you have any, nor in your friends because they are powerful and influential; instead, take pride in God who gives all things and who wishes to give himself above all. Do not brag about the size or beauty of your body, which a little sickness can spoil and disfigure. Do not be pleased with yourself about your ability or talent, lest you displease God, from whom comes the sum of whatever natural good you have. Do not think that you are better than others, lest you appear worse in God's eyes; God knows what we are. Do not be proud of your good deeds, for God's judgments differ from ours, and he is often displeased by what pleases us.

If you have any good qualities, believe that other people have better ones; by doing so you will retain your humility. It does you no harm if you place yourself beneath everyone else; it does you great harm, though, if you place yourself above even one other person. A person who is humble is always at peace, but a proud person carries a heart filled with envy and resentment.

Imitating Christ

1. What are you proud of? What are you ashamed of? What do you boast about? What are you complacent about? Do you feel threatened by these questions? Are you challenged by them? Do you find it difficult to answer them? If you do, then why?
2. Do you consider yourself a humble person? What makes you feel that way? Would you like to be more humble? What would that mean concretely for you in the most basic circumstances of your life?

3. What does it mean to trust in God? Do you do it seldom? Often? Once in a while? Is it possible to place one's confidence in God and in other things? Is it possible to trust in God and to trust in oneself at the same time?

Chapter Eight

Introduction

This chapter reminds us of the necessity of being prudent in choosing our friends and the people we associate with on a regular basis. It tells us that we should be very selective about to whom we open our hearts and share our deepest, most intimate thoughts. This sound advice is colored, however, by the author's own cultural perceptions about the dangers of associating with particular groups of people (e.g., women, young people, outsiders). When reading his words, we are confronted not only with the challenge of selecting our friends wisely and prudently, but also recognizing and confronting the prejudices in our own lives that prevent us from acting charitably toward those we meet.

Of Avoiding Inappropriate Intimacy

Do not open your heart to everyone, but discuss your private concerns with a person who is wise and who reveres God.
Do not spend much time with young people or strangers;

instead, develop the friendships you have, especially with those who are older and wiser than you are. Do not flatter the rich, and do not be eager to be seen with important people. Rather, be with the humble and the simple, with the devout and the obedient, and talk about those things which help you to become more holy. If you are a man under religious vows, do not be intimate with any woman, but commend all good women in general to God; if you are a woman under religious vows, do likewise with men. Seek, instead, a more intimate friendship with God and his angels, and avoid becoming emotionally or spiritually dependent on other people.

We should have great love toward everyone, but intimacy often gets in the way of our spiritual development. Sometimes it happens that a stranger shines from a good reputation, but when we meet him he falls far short of what we expected. Sometimes we intend to please others by our own company, and instead we displease them by the shortcomings they see in us.

Imitating Christ

1. Why is it necessary to choose our friends wisely? What risks do we take when we open our hearts to another person? Have you ever been hurt by doing so? Have you ever hurt another in such a way? Where does one draw the line between appropriate and excessive familiarity?
2. Are you suspicious of any particular groups of people? If so, what makes you feel the way you do? Do they represent a threat to you? Can you identify that threat? Could it be that you are unaware of the subtle prejudices you may have toward particular groups or

peoples or perhaps even individuals? If so, what could you do to get in touch with them?

3. Do you agree with the author's assessment of excessive familiarity with others? What are the similarities in your opinions? What are the differences? How would you describe the way prayerful discretion should enter into our relations with others? What dangers would you emphasize?

Chapter Nine

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the role of obedience in the life of the disciple. It has special meaning for religious, who follow Christ through life in community and a life dedicated to the evangelical counsels. Within properly set parameters, it can also be extended to Christians living in other states of life. For the author, imitating Christ means submitting one's will to the will of the Father. The incarnational dimensions of the Christian faith demand that this act of humble submission have concrete expression in the daily life of the believer. For religious, this embodiment of the ideal finds its expression in the humble submission of one's will to a religious superior. For others, it means a willingness to listen to the opinion of others and an openness to adapt one's ideas in an appropriate way to the situation at hand.

Of Obedience for Those under Religious Vows

It is a very great thing for a person under religious vows to welcome obedience, to live under a Superior, and not to be independent; it is much safer to serve than to lead. Many people are under obedience more out of necessity than love, and there is no end to their unhappiness and complaining because of it. They will never gain spiritual freedom unless they wholeheartedly give up their freedom for the love of God. Run here or run there, you will find no peace except by humbly placing yourself under the rule of a Superior. Many people imagine that they will be better off in another monastery, but they are only fooling themselves.

It is true that we all wish to act as we please, and we all like those people best who agree with us. But if God is among us, it is sometimes necessary to give up our own way of thinking for the sake of peace. Who is so wise that he can understand everything? So, do not have too much confidence in your own opinion, but be willing to hear what others have to say. If your opinion is good and if you leave it for the love of God and follow someone else's, you will be a better person for it. Indeed, I have often heard that it is safer to hear and to accept advice than to give it. It may also happen that each person's opinion may be good, but to refuse to yield to others when reason or cause requires it is a sign of pride and stubbornness.

Imitating Christ

1. Are you a stubborn person? Do you always have to be right? Do you always tell others what they should be thinking or how they should be acting? Do you have a difficult time changing your opinion, even if you know you are wrong?

2. Do you find it difficult to listen to others? Do you let them finish speaking? Are you only waiting for the next pause so that you can relate your own thoughts? What practical steps can you take in your life to become a better listener? Is there anything keeping you from implementing them?
3. Are you willing to give up your own ideas for the sake of peace? Can you think of instances where the prudent thing to do would be to weaken your own position on a particular matter? How do you know when to be flexible in your opinions and when it is necessary to stand firm and defend them?

Chapter Ten

Introduction

This chapter warns us of the dangers of useless gossip. As with the previous chapter, it has special meaning for religious living in a cloistered atmosphere where separation from the world is a structured part of daily life and silence is especially valued as a means of fostering communion with God. With appropriate application, it can also be applied to Christians of other states of life. Excessive talk can be a danger on both sides of the religious cloister and concrete steps should be taken to avoid it as much as possible. Imitating Christ means being prudent in the way we conduct our speech

and being careful not to offend others either in their presence or behind their backs with unkind words and sentiments. It also means trying to avoid those occasions when the topic of conversation turns toward inappropriate or unhealthy subjects that unsettle our inner peace rather than deepen it.

Of Avoiding Unnecessary Talk

As much as you can, avoid being caught up in day-to-day business, for spending too much energy on it gets in the way of our spiritual journey. Even if we have the best of intentions, it easily dominates our lives and we quickly become proud of our successes. I often wish that I had kept silent and had not been so quick to venture out into the world.

I wonder why are we so eager to chatter and gossip with each other, since we seldom return to the quiet of our own hearts without a damaged conscience? The reason is that by idle chit-chat we seek comfort from one another and we hope to lighten our distracted hearts. And to make matters worse, we chatter most freely about our favorite topics, about what we would like to have, or about those things we especially dislike!

What a mistake! This outside comfort is no small detriment to the inner comfort that comes from God. Therefore, we must watch and pray that we do not waste time. If it is proper to speak, speak of what will benefit others spiritually. Bad habits and neglect of our spiritual progress contribute much to our endless chatter; however, devout conversation on spiritual matters greatly helps our progress, particularly where people of like mind and spirit are bound to each other in God.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you engage in excessive talk or gossip? Are you always bringing out the negative side of a situation or the negative side of a person's personality? Do you enjoy talking about others behind their backs? If so, what practical steps could you put in place that would help you to avoid doing so in the future?
2. Do you like being alone? Do you find it easy or difficult? What is your normal experience of silence? Are you indifferent to it? Threatened by it? Nourished by it? Can it help you deepen your peace of mind; your relationship with God?
3. Do you have any regrets about things you have said about others in the past? Do you wish you could take them back? How can you maintain a spirit of recollection in your daily life? Can you think of anything that might help you to avoid engaging in useless chatter?

Chapter Eleven

Introduction

This chapter focuses on rooting out bad habits from our lives so we can make progress in the spiritual life and experience deep inner peace. It asks us not to be meddlesome in other people's affairs, but to make every effort to walk the way of the saints in the footsteps of

Christ. To become holy, it is necessary for us to shrug off all indifference and to seek the Lord in all things. It is also important for us to be out from under the control of our inordinate passions and desires so that we can cooperate with God's grace in the concrete circumstances of our lives. The author admits that it is difficult to rid ourselves of deeply rooted habits, but he insists that God's grace makes all things possible. If we stand steadfast in times of affliction and humbly ask God for strength, we will be able to resist our evil inclinations and make progress in ways we never before thought possible.

Of Finding Peace and Making Spiritual Progress

We might have much peace if we were not such busybodies, for what others say and do is no concern of ours. How can anyone remain at peace for long who entangles himself in other people's business, who constantly seeks new things to do, or who is hardly ever at peace in his own heart? Blessed are the simple in heart, for they shall have much peace!

How were some of the saints so perfect and contemplative? They strove to subordinate all their earthly desires to heavenly ones, and by doing so they could cling to God from the very depths of their hearts and freely attend to him. We are too occupied with our own concerns and too interested in the passing affairs of the world. We seldom completely overcome a single fault, and we have little enthusiasm for our daily progress; thus, we remain cold and only vaguely interested in what we are doing. If we were not so absorbed in ourselves and if we were less confused in our own hearts,

then we might savor divine things and experience something of heavenly contemplation. The greatest hindrance to our spiritual development—indeed, the whole hindrance—is that we allow our passions and desires to control us, and we do not strive to walk in the perfect way of the saints. When we meet the least adversity, we are too quickly dejected and we turn to other people for comfort, instead of to God.

If we made an effort to stand firmly and courageously in the struggle, doubtless we should see the help of our Lord from heaven, for he is ready to help those who trust in his grace; he gives us occasions to fight that we may win. If our spiritual progress relies only on outward observances, our devotion will not last long. Let us lay the axe to the root, so that being purged of unruly passions we may have peace of mind.

If every year we uprooted a single fault, we should soon become perfect. But we often feel that we were better and more pure at the beginning of our spiritual lives than we are now after many years of living our vows! Fervor and progress ought to increase daily, but it is thought to be a fine thing these days if a person can hold on to even a little of those first intense feelings! If we would exercise a little self-discipline at the beginning, then we would later be able to do everything easily and joyfully.

It is hard to give up old habits, but it is even harder to go against one's own will. Yet, if you cannot overcome small, trivial things, when will you overcome difficult ones? Fight the urge when it starts, and break off bad habits, lest perhaps, little by little, they lead you into greater trouble. Oh, if you could only know how much peace for yourself and joy for others your good efforts could bring, I think you would be more anxious for spiritual growth!

Imitating Christ

1. Are you concerned about what others think and say

about you? Do you busy yourself trying to find out? If so, why does it matter so much to you? Does it increase your peace of mind in any way? Does it disturb it?

2. Do you have any bad habits? Have they been habits for a long time? Have you ever tried rooting them out? How difficult was it? Were you successful? Was God in any way involved in the process?
3. Do you want to be a saint? If so, why? How deep is that desire? Do you follow the example of the saints in your daily life? Do you nurture a spirit of recollection? Do you stand firm in the face of adversity? Have you experienced the peace of Christ in your life?

Chapter Twelve

Introduction

This chapter brings to the fore the significance of suffering for the spiritual life. The author admits that no one likes to go through troubles and adversities for their own sake. He recognizes, however, that sometimes such trials help us to deepen our relationship with God. They do so by keeping us humble and by preventing us from becoming proud. When others misjudge us or think poorly of us, we should not repay injury for injury. Rather, we should turn to the Lord with even more heartfelt love and devotion. Adversity helps us to

recognize our utter dependence on God. Without God, we can do no good thing. With God, our suffering is rooted in the heart of Christ and becomes salvific.

Of Putting Troubles to Use

Sometimes it is good for us to have troubles and hardships, for they often call us back to our own hearts. Once there, we know ourselves to be strangers in this world, and we know that we may not believe in anything that it has to offer. Sometimes it is good that we put up with people speaking against us, and sometimes it is good that we be thought of as bad and flawed, even when we do good things and have good intentions. Such troubles are often aids to humility, and they protect us from pride. Indeed, we are sometimes better at seeking God when people have nothing but bad things to say about us and when they refuse to give us credit for the good things we have done! That being the case, we should so root ourselves in God that we do not need to look for comfort anywhere else.

When a person of good will is troubled or tempted or vexed by evil thoughts, then he better understands his need for God, without whom he can do nothing good at all. In such a state, he is sad and he sighs and prays because of the miseries he suffers; then, he is tired of living any longer and he wishes to die, so that he may be set free to be with Christ. When all that happens, he knows for certain that perfect security and full peace cannot exist in this world.

Imitating Christ

1. What kinds of suffering have you experienced in your life: physical, emotional, mental, social, or spiritual? How was it inflicted? By someone else? Did you feel

- victimized? Have you ever inflicted suffering on another person? If so, on who and in what ways?
2. How do you respond to suffering in yourself; in others; in God? Do you try to avoid it? When it comes, do you try to alleviate it? Do you find meaning in it? If so, how? In what ways does suffering relate to your spiritual life?
 3. Do you agree with the author's presentation of the uses of adversity? Do you disagree with it in any way? Can suffering make a person bitter toward God rather than more reliant on him? Have you reacted in different ways to the suffering that has come along your way? How would you outline your various uses of adversity?

Chapter Thirteen

Introduction

This chapter focuses on a type of adversity common to all of us. None of us can escape temptations. What is important is not whether we have them, but how we respond to them. The author reminds us that we can resist them or give in to them; learn from them or turn from God because of them. Temptations begin with a thought, then move to an image, then focus on a concrete pleasure, and end in consent. We resist temptations not by running away from them (where could we run?), but by snipping them at the bud through humility and patience. Only by

turning to God for help will we gradually be made strong enough to resist the inclination to sin. For this reason, the author tells us that we must be on guard when temptations come so that we will have quick recourse to God.

Of Resisting Temptations

As long as we live in this world we cannot be without trials and temptations; hence, it is written in Job: “Our life on earth is a temptation.” We should be anxious, then, about our temptations and be watchful in prayer, lest the devil, who never sleeps but prowls around seeking whom he may devour, find room to trick us.

No one is so perfect and so holy that he does not sometimes have temptations; we cannot be without them entirely. Yet, temptations are often very good for a person, granted that they are troublesome and unpleasant, for through them one is humbled, cleansed and instructed. All the saints have passed through many trials and temptations and have profited from them. Those who could not deal with temptations have become lost and have fallen away.

There is no religious order so holy nor place so secluded that there are no temptations or hardships. No one is entirely safe from temptation no matter how long he lives, for we carry temptation’s source within us: We have all been born with a fierce, self-centered desire for success, status and pleasure that clashes with our longing for God. When one temptation or trial is over, another comes along, and we shall always have something to contend with, for we have lost the original happiness that God intended for us. Many people try to escape temptations, then fall more severely into them! We cannot win by running away, but by patience and true humility we become stronger than all our enemies.

The person who only runs away from temptation and does not tear it out by the root will not gain very much. In fact, for such a person, temptations will quickly return, and they will be even worse. If you patiently put up with them, you will gradually overcome your temptations better through God's grace than by your own harshness and self-assertion. When you are tempted, seek advice often, and never deal harshly with others who are tempted; instead, comfort them as you would have them comfort you.

The beginning of all evil temptations is a mind not firmly fixed on its purpose and a small trust in God, for as a ship without a rudder is driven to and fro by the waves, so a careless person who abandons his course is tempted in many ways. Fire tempers iron, and temptation tempers the just person. Often, we do not know what we are able to do, but temptation reveals what we are. One must be watchful, however, especially when temptation begins, for then the enemy is more easily overcome if he is not allowed to enter inside the mind's door but is kept firmly outside the threshold while he knocks. It is for this reason that someone said: "Resist the beginning; the remedy comes too late," for first a simple thought comes to the mind, and then a vivid picture takes shape; afterward comes delight, then a small mental concession, and finally ready acceptance. Thus, little by little, the malignant enemy gains full entrance when he is not resisted at the beginning. And the longer one puts off resisting, the weaker he becomes each day and the stronger the enemy grows.

Some people suffer terrible temptations at the beginning of their lives with Christ. Some at the end. And some suffer their entire lives. Some people are tempted lightly enough, and this is according to God's wisdom and fairness. God ponders the state and merits of all people, and he arranges everything in advance for our well-being. So, we must not despair when tempted, but pray to God the more fervently that he may see fit to help us. Certainly God, accordingly to

the saying of Paul, “will make such issue with temptation that we may be able to bear it.” So, let us humble our souls under God’s hand in every temptation and trouble, for he will save the humble in spirit and raise them up.

By temptations and troubles a person proves how much progress he has made in the spiritual life, and in that stands great merit and virtue shines more clearly. It is no great thing if a person is devout and eager for holiness when he feels no burden, but if he endures patiently during difficult times, there is hope of great progress. Some people are spared from great temptations and are often overcome in small daily ones. This happens so that, being humbled, they may never trust themselves in great things if they are so weak in such ordinary ones.

Imitating Christ

1. Where do temptations come from? The devil? Yourself? Others? God? A combination of them? Do you consider them only as negative factors in your life? Have you ever learned from your temptations? Do you agree with the author that we can sometimes profit from our temptations? If so, in what ways?
2. Which temptations in your life do you find most troublesome? Have you found it difficult to resist them? Have you given in to them often? What practical defenses have you developed to deal with them? Keeping busy? Changing your environment? Changing your train of thought? Seeking out someone to talk to? Saying a prayer to God?
3. What advice would you give another person about resisting temptations? Is there anything you would

omit or add to the author's presentation in this chapter? Would you throw it away completely and start from scratch? In your opinion, what is the single most important point someone should know about the nature of temptation and the means of resisting it?

Chapter Fourteen

Introduction

This chapter reminds us that we should be slow in judging the actions and intentions of others. While it is important for us to examine ourselves for our own personal preferences and hidden motivations, we must be extremely careful when doing the same for others. Our judgments about others are usually incorrect. Most of us act out of mixed motivations, many of which do not easily come to light. Sometimes it is very difficult for us to understand our own actions, let alone those of others. Our real reasons for acting the way we do are often deep beneath our own conscious awareness. For this very reason, we should be extremely slow in judging others. Only the power of God will enable us to transcend our tendency toward rash judgments. Only by being completely subject to him will we begin to view others with the burning love of Christ.

Of Avoiding Hasty Judgments

Look to yourself, and beware of judging what others do. In judging others a person works to no purpose, often makes mistakes, and easily does the wrong thing, but in judging and analyzing ourselves, we always work to our own advantage.

Our judgments are often based on our personal likes and dislikes; consequently, our private prejudices can easily overshadow our sound thinking. If we would always have our attention focused on God and if we would long for him alone, we would not be so easily upset when others do not accept what we have to say. But often something lurks within us, or intrudes from outside of us, which draws us along with it. Many people have their own private motives for what they do, and they are not even aware of them. They seem to be quite content when things are done as they like, but if events take a different turn, they quickly become testy and withdrawn. Differences of thought and opinion lead to more than enough bickering among friends and neighbors, among religious and devout people.

Old habits are hard to break, and no one is easily led beyond his own point of view. If you lean more on your own reason or diligence than on the strength of your life with Jesus Christ, you will have only a slim chance of becoming an enlightened person—and if you do, it will happen slowly, indeed. God wants us to conform our lives perfectly to his will and to reach beyond our passions and prejudices through an intense love for him.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you tend to be critical of others? Do you always look for their flaws? Do you look for their hidden motives? What is the difference between a rash and a prudent judgment? How can you tell the difference?
2. Do you spend sufficient time examining your own motivations for your actions? Do you often act out of

mixed motivations? Are you aware of what they are? Do you think there may be some you are not aware of?

3. Does love for others affect the way we perceive them? How so? Does it affect the way we use of power to criticize and to judge? Does love for God affect our dealings with others? Does God's love for us affect the way he perceives and judges us?

Chapter Fifteen

Introduction

This chapter depicts charity as the key to spiritual growth. This virtue sustains all the others. It helps us to recognize the transitory nature of all things. It also gives the works we do deep spiritual value. God looks not so much to *what* we do as to *why* we do it. In God's eyes, the smallest act of selfless love is more important than the greatest of human accomplishments. The person acting out of charity is never self-seeking, but always seeks the good of others. To such a person, the common good is more important than his or her own self-interest. Our capacity to act out of charity comes from God and ultimately will return to God, the beginning and the end of all that is good. Charity is one of the three things that last (1 Cor 13:13). Without it, we will never see God face to face.

Of Works Done Out of Love

Never do what you know is wrong for anything in the world or to please anyone. Yet, to serve the needy a good work may be put aside or exchanged for a better one. In doing so, a good work is not lost; it is changed into something better.

Without love good works are worthless, but with love they become wholly rewarding no matter how small and insignificant they may seem. Indeed, God places more importance on the reason you work than on how much work you actually do. A person does much who loves much; he does much who does it well; he does well who serves the common good rather than himself.

Often what seems to be love is not love at all but the natural feelings that we all have. Along with such feelings, though, usually come questionable motives, such as willfulness, the hope of reward and self-interest. The person who has pure and perfect love, however, seeks self-praise in nothing, but wishes only that God may be glorified in everything. Such a person envies no one, for he sees God in everyone. He does not wish to take pleasure in himself, but he wishes to become blessed in God's eyes above all good things. He believes that God is the source of everything; like a spring, all good flows from him. In the end, all the saints come to rest in God. Oh, a person who has even a spark of real love should truly feel all the things of this world to be of little importance, compared to God!

Imitating Christ

1. Is it possible to perform a purely selfless action? If so, have you ever done one? Do you know anyone who has done one? Is it possible to act out of charity and out of self-interest at one and the same time? Do you ever do this?

2. Is there a difference between self-interest and genuine love of self? How would you describe the difference? Is charity opposed to both? Is it possible to act out of charity and out of genuine love of self? Can you think of any examples?
3. Can you think of any instances where you have found it difficult to know what would be the most charitable thing to do in a particular situation? How did you resolve your dilemma? Did the example of Jesus influence you in any way?

Chapter Sixteen

Introduction

This chapter asks us to be patient with others when we encounter faults in them which they are unwilling (or unable) to change. Our inability to correct our own faults should make us compassionate toward others and their own difficulties. Patience has to do with “suffering in the present moment.” It is the ability to endure the trials of daily life with a keen sense of their close connection with the suffering of Christ. The author points out that none of us is perfect and that we should not demand that others change when we ourselves cannot. When we are patient, we tolerate the weaknesses of others and place them in God’s care. We recognize that, before God, all of us are in need of grace and called to walk the way of

conversion.

Of Putting Up with Others' Faults

What we cannot change in ourselves or in others we ought to endure patiently until God wishes it to be otherwise. Perhaps it is this way to try our patience, for without trials our merits count for little. Nevertheless, when you run into such problems you ought to pray that God may find it fitting to help you and that you may bear your troubles well. If anyone who is spoken to once or twice will not listen and change his ways, do not argue with him, but leave it all to God, for he knows well how to turn bad things into good. He knows how to accomplish his will and how to express himself fully in all his servants.

Take pains to be patient in bearing the faults and weaknesses of others, for you too have many flaws that others must put up with. If you cannot make yourself as you would like to be, how can you expect to have another person entirely to your liking? We would willingly have others be perfect, and yet we fail to correct our own faults. We want others to be strictly corrected, and yet we are unwilling to be corrected ourselves. Other peoples' far-ranging freedom annoys us, and yet we insist on having our own way. We wish others to be tied down by rules, and yet we will not allow ourselves to be held in check in any way at all. It is evident how rarely we think of our neighbor as ourselves!

If everything were perfect, what would we have to endure from others for God's sake? But now God has so arranged things that we may learn to bear each other's burdens, for no one is without faults, no one is without burdens, no one is wholly self-sufficient, no one has enough wisdom all by himself. That being the case, we must support and comfort each other; together we must help, teach and advise one another, for the strength that each person has will best be

seen in times of trouble. Such times do not make us weak;
they show what we are.

Imitating Christ

1. Are you demanding of others? Do you expect too much from them? Do you get angry over their weaknesses? Do you correct them harshly when they make a mistake or fail to live up to your expectations?
2. Is there some fault or bad habit in your life that you yourself have not been able to change? If so, how do you deal with it? Do you simply ignore it? Does it make you depressed? Are you able to place it in God's hands and bear it with patience?
3. Do you react to the weaknesses of others in the same way you react to your own? What are the similarities and dissimilarities? Are you harder on others than you are on yourself? Are you harder on yourself than you are on others? Do you have a double standard?

Chapter Seventeen

Introduction

Although this chapter focuses on the challenges of the monastic life, readers from other walks of life have through the years benefited from it greatly. The reason for this positive reception has to do with the way the author highlights some of the key elements of Christian discipleship. Discipline, perseverance, and service are

important characteristics that every Christian must seek to foster. Readers have also taken to heart the author's emphasis on the importance of the relationship between discipline (from which the word "disciple" comes) and internal conversion. The chapter can help us to understand what it means to foster a certain "monasticism of the heart," which seeks to foster a contemplative attitude toward life in all circumstances. Being a disciple of Christ means seeking nothing but God at all times. Others may consider us fools for doing so. In the eyes of God, however, we have discovered the one and only thing that matters.

Of the Monastic Life

You should learn to discipline yourself in many things if you wish to keep peace and harmony with others. It is no small thing to live in a monastery or a religious community and to remain there without complaining and to persevere faithfully until death. Blessed is that person who has lived there well and has finished happily! If you wish to act as you should, and if you wish to make progress, think of yourself as a stranger on earth, as a pilgrim. You should become a fool for Christ if you wish to lead a religious life. What you wear and the customs you follow contribute little; rather, changing your ways and refocusing all of your energies toward the spiritual life will make you a true religious.

A person who seeks anything other than the purely divine and the well-being of his soul will find nothing but trouble and sorrow in a monastery. Likewise, one cannot remain at peace for long who does not strive to be the least important

person in the community, attending to others with humility and love. You have come to serve, not to rule. Know that you are called to endurance and work, not to idleness and talk. In the monastery, a person is tried like gold in the furnace; here, no one can stay unless he resolves wholeheartedly to live a humble life for God.

Imitating Christ

1. What is the relationship between external discipline and interior disposition? Do you emphasize one over the other? How are the two related in your life of faith? Do you tend to neglect one? Can discipline help to shape one's inner life?
2. What does "fostering a contemplative attitude toward life" mean to you? Is it possible to nurture such an attitude beyond the walls of the monastery in the hectic world of the secular marketplace? Is it possible to live a "monasticism of the heart?" What would such an attitude of heart mean for you concretely?
3. Do you seek God with all your heart, mind, and soul? What else do you seek? Do others consider you a fool because of your Christian beliefs? If so, why do they think that way? Does it bother you that they do?

Chapter Eighteen

Introduction

This chapter uses the example of the great communion of saints who have gone before us to

enkindle in us a deep desire to grow in holiness. It points to the great variety of saints who became strangers to the world in order to become intimate friends of God and asks us to follow their example. We too can walk in the footsteps of the Lord. All that is needed is that we rise from our indifference and ask the Lord to help us to follow him. As might be expected, the author points to saints whom he considers to be exemplary models of religious life. The Lord, however, has provided us with outstanding examples of holiness in every state of life. Many of these holy men and women are alive and in our midst. All we need to do is ask the Lord to give us the eyes to see.

Of the Examples of the Holy Fathers

Look into the lively examples of the holy fathers, in whom true perfection and religion shone, and you will see that what we do is very little—indeed, it is almost nothing. Alas! what is our life if compared with theirs? Saints and friends of Christ, they served the Lord in hunger and thirst, in cold and nakedness, in toil and weariness, in vigils and fasts, in prayers and holy meditations, in persecutions and in many scornful insults. Oh, how many grave troubles they suffered, the apostles, martyrs, confessors, virgins and all the others who resolved to follow Christ! They did not care about their lives in this world, as long as they might possess them in eternal life.

Oh, how strict and renounced a life the holy fathers led in the desert; what long and heavy temptations they endured; how often they were harassed by the enemy; how many

passionate prayers they offered to God; what rigorous abstinence they practiced; what great zeal and fervor they had for spiritual growth; what courageous struggles they waged to overcome their weaknesses; what pure and upright efforts they continually made toward God!

They labored throughout the day and at night they were free for long hours of prayer, although during work they did not cease at all from mental prayer. They spent all their time profitably. Every hour free to attend to God seemed short, and in the great sweetness of contemplation they sometimes completely forgot to take care of their physical needs! They gave up all riches, dignities, honors, friends and relatives; they clung to nothing of this world. They scarcely would take the necessities of life: Diverting their attention from God to themselves, even when they had to, pained them. So, they were poor in earthly things but very rich in grace and virtue. Outwardly they were in want, but inwardly they were refreshed with God's grace and comfort.

The world saw them as strangers, but God saw them as close and intimate friends. To themselves they seemed insignificant. The world often despised them, but in God's eyes they were precious and beloved. They were grounded in true humility; they lived in simple obedience; they walked in love and patience; and so they grew daily in spirit, and they won great grace with God. They are given as examples for all of us, and they ought to challenge us more to progress well than a legion of apathetic people tempt us to relax.

Oh, how great was the fervor of all religious men and women in the early days of their holy orders! Oh, how great was their devotion in prayer, and how great was their rivalry in virtue! What great discipline they had, and what reverence and obedience blossomed in them all under the rule of a Superior! The traces left even now speak to the fact that they were truly holy and perfect people, who, fighting vigorously, rose above all the temptations of this world.

In these days a person is thought to be great who stays out of trouble and who patiently accepts what he has undertaken! Ah, the indifference and negligence of the way things are today! Nowadays we quickly fall away from our first intense spiritual feelings, and out of weariness and indifference we soon grow tired of living! Oh, that the desire to grow in virtue may not sleep in you when you have often seen so many examples of such great devotion!

Imitating Christ

1. What is your attitude toward the communion of the saints? Is it positive or negative? Vital or indifferent? Can you identify with the saints? Does their holiness seem remote and unattainable? What attitudes and actions of holiness are today's saints called to embody?
2. Do you have a deep devotion to any saints in particular? Why are you attracted to them? What traits do you admire in them? Do you try to foster the same attitudes in your own life. Do you want to befriend God in the same way?
3. Do you believe that God can and will make you holy? A saint? A close, intimate friend? Do you believe that you are called to become a member of the communion of saints? Do you see the relationship between this call and your present situation in life?

Chapter Nineteen

Introduction

This chapter speaks about the characteristics of a good religious, but can be interpreted in a wider context and extended to all who call themselves disciples of Christ. It emphasizes the importance of making sure that our outward lives correspond to the attitudes and dispositions of our inner lives. For this reason, growth in holiness is closely related to progress in the life of virtues, those dispositions of mind and heart which constantly orient us toward all that is good. The author reminds us that we can grow in virtue only by cooperating with God's grace and making firm resolutions to implement their demands in the concrete circumstances of our lives. These resolutions must be tempered by moderation (especially in corporeal penances) and play an essential role in the way of conversion.

Of the Training of a Good Religious Person

The life of a good, religious person ought to be strong in every virtue so that he may truly be what others think him to be. And he should be so with good reason, for it is God who watches us—God, whom we ought to revere wherever we are, and walk the world as pure as angels in his sight. Every day we should renew our resolve to live a holy life, and everyday we should kindle ourselves to a burning love, just as if today were the first day of our new life in Christ. We should say: “Help me, Lord God, to fulfill my good intention and your holy service. Starting today, let me begin perfectly, for what I have done so far is nothing.”

Progress follows intention, and a person needs much earnest effort if he wishes to progress well, for if someone who resolutely plans often fails, what will happen to the person who seldom plans anything and who cannot carry out his plans even when he makes them? Many things may cause us to walk away from what we have started, and we seldom do so without some loss. The intention of earnest and well-meaning people depends more on the grace of God than on their own wisdom; such people always place their trust in God no matter what they do, for man proposes but God disposes. The path a person takes does not lie within himself.

If for piety's sake or another person's benefit we sometimes skip a spiritual exercise that we are used to doing, it may be made up easily later on. But if we skip it out of boredom or negligence, it is a real fault and will prove harmful. Try as we may, it is still easy to fall short in many things. Nevertheless, we should always have some definite plan firmly in mind, especially one to counter those things which most often stand in our way. We must examine our outward and inward affairs and set them both in order, for both are necessary for our spiritual progress.

If you cannot be at one with yourself all the time, try to be so at least once a day, particularly in the morning or evening. In the morning make your plans; in the evening go over your conduct, reviewing how you behaved this day in word, deed and thought, for in these you may often have displeased God or your neighbor. Arm yourself courageously against the devil's reckless arrogance. Curb your appetite and you will have an easier time restraining yourself from a whole list of other cravings. Never be completely idle, but be reading or writing or praying or meditating or working in some way for the common good.

For all that, physical disciplines are to be undertaken with discretion, and they are not to be taken up equally by everyone. Those practices which are not part of community life are not to be displayed in public, for private things are

more safely worked at alone. Take care not to be sluggish toward common practices and more enthusiastic toward private ones, but once you have fully and faithfully fulfilled what you ought to do, if you have free time, then you may give yourself to your private devotions. All people cannot have the same disciplines, but this is more proper for one, than for another.

Moreover, for certain times different disciplines are appropriate; some are appropriate for feast days, others are more fitting for common days. Some we need in time of temptation and others in time of peace and quiet. Some we love to think of when we are sad and others when we are joyful in the Lord. Around principal feasts we should renew good disciplines and more fervently ask the saints for their prayers. From feast to feast we should resolve to live as if we were about to leave this world and come to the eternal feast; therefore, we should prepare ourselves carefully at times of devotion, live more devoutly, and keep every observance more strictly, as if shortly God were to reward us for our labor. And if our reward is delayed, let us believe ourselves the less well prepared, still unworthy of the glory that shall be revealed to us at the proper time. Let us be eager to prepare ourselves better for our departure. “Blessed is the servant,” says Luke the Evangelist, “whom the Lord, when he comes, will find on guard. In truth I say to you, he will set him over all that he has.”

Imitating Christ

1. Is there a gap between the outward expression of your faith and your attitudes and inner dispositions? If so, how would you describe it? What would you like to change in it? How could you go about it?
2. What attitudes and inner dispositions do you need to develop in order to grow in holiness? Can you be

specific? Have you felt lacking in these virtues for some time? What concrete resolutions could you make in your life that would help you to foster them?

3. Do virtues shape actions or do actions shape virtue? What is the relationship between what we do and the way we think and feel? Is the relationship only one way? Does a circular relationship exist between our inner and outer lives? If so, what implications does such a relationship have for our growth in the Spirit?

Chapter Twenty

Introduction

This chapter highlights the importance of solitude for growth in the spiritual life. Geared for contemplative religious, it offers advice regarding one's relationship to the world that makes little sense for Christians of other walks of life. Love of solitude, however, is not reserved only for contemplative religious. All of Christ's disciples are called to foster in their lives a disposition of inner quiet. There, in the interior regions of the soul, we can listen to God and rest in his Spirit. All of us need to put time aside from our hectic lives so that we can simply be still in the presence of God. We must do this, however, in a practical way that is appropriate to our calling. Silence and solitude are invitations, not heavy burdens, since they provide us with an opportunity to experience God in the

deepest recesses of our hearts.

Of the Love of Solitude and Silence

Seek a proper time to be at leisure with yourself, and think often of God's kindness. Leave curiosity alone. Read subjects that touch the heart rather than those that pass the time. If you will avoid needless talk and idle visits and not listen for the latest gossip, you will find plenty of suitable time for good meditations. The greatest saints guarded their time alone and chose to serve God in solitude. Someone has said, "As often as I went out among men, I returned less of a man." We often experience this when we have spent a long time in idle chatter. It is easier to be completely silent than not to be long-winded; it is easier to stay at home than to be properly on guard outside the monastery. A person whose goal is the inward, spiritual life must cast his lot with Jesus and not follow the crowd.

No one is secure except the person who freely keeps to himself. No one speaks securely except the person who willingly keeps silent. No one leads securely except the person who freely serves. No one commands securely except the person who thoroughly obeys. No one knows secure joy except the person who holds a good conscience in his own heart.

The security of the saints always sprang from holding God in deep awe and profound reverence. And just because their great virtues and grace were so evident did not mean that they no longer had to be diligent and humble. The assurance of lesser people springs from pride and presumption; in the end it becomes self-deception. Whether you are a good monk or a devout hermit, never promise yourself security in this life. Often those people whom others hold in the highest esteem have been placed in serious danger by their own overconfidence. So, it is better for many people that they not

be entirely free from temptation. Rather, they should be attacked by it often, lest they become overconfident or puffed with pride or attracted to material comforts instead of to God.

Oh, if we never sought after fleeting joys or never busied ourselves chasing after possessions and status, what a good conscience we would keep! Oh, if we would get rid of all empty cares and think only on wholesome and divine things and place all our hope in God, what great peace and rest we would have! No one is worthy of heavenly comfort unless he has spent great effort training himself in true sorrow for his own failings and in deep compassion for others.

If you wish to feel this in your heart, go into your room and shut out the noise of the world. As it is written: "In the privacy of your room, feel sorrow and compassion deeply." In your room you will find what you often let slip outside. A room continually used grows sweet; ill-kept it breeds boredom. If you stay in your room and keep it well when you first turn to God, then later on it will become a beloved friend and a dear comfort.

In silence and peace a devout soul makes progress and learns the secrets of the scriptures. Only in silence and peace does a devout soul find floods of tears in which it may wash and cleanse itself each night. The further the soul is from the noise of the world, the closer it may be to its Creator, for God, with his holy angels, will draw close to a person who seeks solitude and silence. It is better to remain alone and to care for your soul than to neglect yourself and work miracles. It is praiseworthy for a person under monastic vows to stay in his monastery, to avoid being seen, and to keep to himself. Why wish to see what you cannot have? The world passes away and so does the craving for what it has to offer. The desire to see, to hear, to smell, to taste and to touch all those things that you do without will lead you astray. Then, after you indulge your desires, what will you carry back to the monastery but a heavy conscience and a

divided heart? A happy outing often brings a sad return, and a happy evening makes an unhappy morning. All such joys enter delightfully in just this way, but in the end they bite and destroy.

What can you see elsewhere that you cannot see here? Look at the sky and earth and all the elements, for from these all things are made. What can you see anywhere under the sun that can endure for long? Perhaps you think to satisfy yourself? Forget it. You cannot. If you could see all things at once right in front of your eyes, what would it all be but an empty vision? Lift your eyes to God on high, and pray for what you have done and for what you have failed to do. Leave vain things to vain people, and give your attention to those things that God asks of you. Go into your room, shut your door, and call upon Jesus, your beloved. Stay with him in the privacy of your own room, for you will not find such peace anywhere else. If you had not gone out simply to amuse yourself or if you had not listened so readily to this or that bit of gossip, you would have continued on in true peace better than you have. If you like to do such things, then afterwards you have to put up with a restless heart.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you ever put time aside simply to sit in silence and rest in the presence of God? If so, how often do you do it? Where do you go? What do you do? Do you look forward to it? Do you wish you had more time to do it?
2. Given your present circumstances and situation in life, what do you think would be a realistic expectation for putting aside a period of time each day for prayer? Five minutes? Ten minutes? A half an hour? More? How would you like to fill that time? What role would silence have in your prayer time?

3. Does resting quietly in the presence of God help you in any way with the rest of your life? Is there a connection between spending some quiet time with God and living the life of a disciple? What does the author mean when he writes: “Go into your room, shut your door, and call upon Jesus, your beloved?”

Chapter Twenty-One

Introduction

This chapter reminds us that fear of the Lord and genuine contrition of heart pave the path of conversion. We cannot grow in holiness if we do not have a deep sense of our creaturely status before God, one that fills us with that “holy awe” before the ground of our being. This sense of “sacred” or “holy fear” helps us to view our weaknesses and evil inclinations in an entirely different light. We look at our sins and are filled with a deep sense of regret for our failure to walk in fellowship with God. This regret swells within our hearts and turns into genuine contrition of heart. We recognize how unworthy we are of God’s love and, worse yet, how ungrateful we have been for refusing to cooperate with his grace. Such contrition penetrates the heart and helps us to see all things in their proper light. With it, we can hope to make some headway in our journey to God. Without it, we will never be able to give serious thought to our present state

of exile.

Of Heartfelt Remorse

If you wish to make any spiritual progress, keep yourself rooted in a profound love of God; do not be too free, but direct all your feelings toward maintaining an inner calm, and do not cave in to chasing after empty pleasures. Regret your sins from the bottom of your heart, and you will find true devotion. Remorse opens up many good things which laxity is usually quick to ruin. It is a wonder that a person can ever completely rejoice in this life if he reflects on how far he has strayed from God and on the many dangers to his soul.

Through a light heart and indifference to our faults, we fail to feel the sorrows of our souls; indeed, we often laugh when we should weep. There is no true freedom nor real joy except in loving God and in having a good conscience. That person is indeed fortunate who can throw off all distractions that get in his way and who can focus intently on feeling deep sorrow for his sins. The person who separates himself from whatever can stain or burden his conscience is truly happy. Fight bravely, for habit overcomes habit. If you can leave others alone, they will gladly let you do what you have to do. Do not be drawn into other people's affairs nor entangle yourself with the concerns of people in high places. Always keep an eye on yourself first, and take special care to correct yourself before correcting your friends. If people do not like you, do not be sad about it. But do be sad about this: that you do not live as well and as carefully as a servant of God and a devout, religious person should.

It is often more useful and safer not to have many comforts in this life, especially physical comforts. Yet, if we lack comforts from God, or if we do not feel them very often, it is our own fault, for we rarely take the time to recognize our

sins and to feel sorrow for them. When we do, we are sure to feel unworthy of God's favor and more worthy of the estrangement that we do feel. When a person becomes filled with sorrow and regret for his sins, then the whole world looks different to him. A good person finds reason enough for mourning and weeping, for whether he thinks of himself or of his neighbor, he knows that no one lives without hardships in this life. And the more closely he examines himself the more he grieves. The grounds for our just grief and remorse are our faults and our sins. We lie so entangled in them that we are seldom able to fix our minds on heavenly things.

If you thought more often of your death than of a long life, you would doubtless correct yourself more earnestly. And if you would prudently consider the future punishment of hell or purgatory, I believe that you would freely bear labor and sorrow and would not be afraid to go to great extremes to be worthy of God's grace. But because these things do not cut through to our hearts, and because we still cling to those things that flatter us, we remain cold and terribly lazy. Often it is a lack of spirit that makes us so willing to complain; therefore, humbly pray to the Lord that he may help you feel sorrow for your sins, and say with the prophet: "Feed me, Lord, with the bread of tears, and give me a measure of tears to drink."

Imitating Christ

1. Does the phrase "fear of the Lord" have positive or negative connotations for you? Does understanding the phrase in terms of "holy awe" shift the focus of meaning for you in any way? In what way is "holy awe" a requirement for progress in the spiritual life?
2. Have you ever been truly sorry for something? How did it make you feel? What did you do about it? Do

you find it easy to ask for forgiveness? Do you find it easy to extend forgiveness to others?

3. What role does contrition of heart play in your relationship with God? Do you confess your sins to God? In prayer? By helping others? Through sacramental reconciliation? Does contrition of heart affect your relations with others? Does it give you any deeper insights into yourself?

Chapter Twenty-Two

Introduction

This chapter emphasizes the weakness of the human condition and reminds us that true happiness comes only to those who turn to God and keep their eyes fixed on him. The author establishes a strong line of demarcation between this world and the next. Because the present world brings nothing but trial, suffering, and misery, he exhorts his readers to keep their eyes firmly fixed on the next. His stark description of the trials of life on earth go against the current of our present-day sensitivities, which focus more on the fundamental goodness of creation and the ultimate transformation of its imperfections by the power of love. At the same time, the author's words capture an aspect of human experience that forces us to ponder the meaning of our lives and the focus of our ultimate concern.

Of Human Misery

You are unhappy wherever you are and wherever you turn unless you turn yourself to God. Why are you troubled because things do not work out the way you would like? Is there anyone who has everything he wants? I don't. You don't. No one on earth does. There is no one in the world without some trouble or uncertainty, be he a king or a pope. Who is it who has the better part? Certainly, the person who can endure anything for God.

Many people who do not know any better say, "See what a good life that man has! How rich, how great, how powerful and distinguished!" But direct your attention toward heavenly riches and you will see that all these possessions and honors are awfully flimsy; even more, they are oppressive, because a person never has them without anxiety and fear. A person's happiness is not in having many possessions; indeed, a modest share is enough.

Truly, life can be a great trial! The more one wishes to be spiritual, the more difficult the present life can seem, for as one progresses in the spiritual life, his flawed nature becomes more and more apparent. To eat, to drink, to watch, to sleep, to rest, to work and to be subject to life's other necessities can be a great bother to a devout person who wishes to concentrate on the spiritual life. Indeed, a person who quietly lives his life in his own heart is greatly weighed down by what the world requires of him; whence, the prophet devoutly prays that he may be freed as far as possible, saying: "Deliver me from my necessities, Lord."

But woe to them who do not know the true state of their own souls, and more woe to them who prize this unhappy, flawed life as the highest good. Some people cling so tightly to life that, although they can scarcely get the bare necessities by working or begging, they would still be willing to live here forever, caring nothing for the kingdom of God. Oh, how

mad and faithless in heart are such people, who lie so deeply mired in their own immediate concerns that they care for nothing but material things! And, indeed, in the end these unfortunate people will know to their sorrow how cheap and worthless were those things that were so important to them. On the other hand, God's saints and all the devout friends of Christ took no account of material possessions nor of what marked success in this life, but their whole hope and intent focused on eternal possessions. All that they wished for was lifted up toward the permanent and invisible, lest love of visible things should drag them down to the lowest depths.

My dear friend, do not lose confidence in progressing in the spiritual life; you still have time and opportunity. Why put off your decision? Get up and begin at once and say: "Now is the time to act. Now is the time to fight. Now is the proper time to change." When you are out of sorts and troubled, then is the time for gaining merit. You must go through fire and water before you come to comfort. Unless you discipline yourself rigorously, you will not overcome your weaknesses. As long as we carry about this frail body, we cannot be free of sin nor can we live without weariness and sorrow. We would willingly be at rest from all trouble, but because we have lost our innocence through sin, we have also lost our true happiness; therefore, you must have patience and wait for God's mercy until this difficulty passes and death is swallowed up by life.

Oh, how great is human frailty, which is always prone to doing those things it shouldn't! Today you confess your sins and tomorrow you do what you confessed all over again! Now you resolve to be on guard and an hour later you act as if you had never made the decision! Since we are so frail and unstable, we are right in having a humble opinion of ourselves. We can quickly lose through carelessness what we gained through grace with much time and effort.

What will become of us in the end, we who so quickly lose our resolve? Too bad for us if we wish to settle back and rest

as if peace and safety were already accomplished! Why, not a sign of true holiness has yet to appear in our daily lives! It would be good for us to start all over and, like good beginners, be taught the ways of good behavior once again. If we did, there might be some hope of changing in the future and some hope of spiritual progress.

Imitating Christ

1. Is it possible to be so concerned about the things of this world that we lose interest in our relationship with God? Is this a problem in the affluent corners of today's world? In other corners? Is it a problem for you?
2. Is it possible to affirm the goodness of the world and also to be cautious of its dangers? Is it sometimes necessary to point out the limits of what the world has to offer? Which is worse: to overemphasize these limits or to simply ignore them?
3. What kinds of happiness can we find in the world? Can you list specifics? What are their limits? Their strengths? Their weaknesses? Do they bring true happiness? Can they lead us to God? Can they lead us away from God?

Chapter Twenty-Three

Introduction

This chapter confronts us with the inevitability of death and exhorts us to prepare well for its oncoming

approach. Few of us enjoy thinking about death. We know we must face it one day, but we prefer to put off dealing with it. We are all afraid of dying, even though we may not like to admit it. The author reminds us of the urgency of the situation. No one knows just when he or she will die. Each day could literally be our last on earth, and he advises us to live it as such. Doing so, however, should not make us morbid or depressed. To live life in the presence of death helps us to cherish the present moment and to weigh the eternal significance of our actions. It invites us to let go of life so that we can follow Christ on every stage of his paschal journey.

Of Thinking about Death

Very soon it will be over with you here; then, see how things stand! Today we are, and tomorrow we are gone. And when we are taken out of sight, we soon pass out of mind. Oh, the dullness and hardness of our hearts that only think of the present and do not look forward more to the future. This being the case, you ought to master yourself in every act and thought as if you were to die today. If you had a good conscience, you would not fear death so much. It would be better to guard against sins than to run away from death. If you are not prepared today, how will you be ready tomorrow? Tomorrow is an uncertain day, and how do you know if you will have a tomorrow?

What good is it to live long when we improve so little? A long life does not always improve us; in fact, it often adds to our problems! Would that we could spend even one day well in this world! Many people count the years of their lives in

Christ, but often not much comes of their attempts to change their lives. If it is frightful to die, perhaps it is more dangerous still to live a long life. Blessed is that person who always has the hour of death before his eyes and who is daily prepared to die!

If you have ever seen a person die, reflect that you too must pass the same way. When it is morning, imagine that you may not reach evening. But, when evening is done, do not be so bold as to promise yourself a morning. Always be ready, therefore, and live so that death may never find you unprepared. Many people die suddenly and unexpectedly; no one knows at what hour the Son of Man will come. When that final hour does come, you will begin to think quite differently about all your past life, and you will be exceedingly sorry that you were so careless and remiss.

How happy and wise is that person who strives now to be in life what he wishes to be found in death. He will die happily if he has lived for God and not for himself, if he has had a burning desire to advance in virtue, a love of discipline, a spirit of penance, quick obedience, self-denial and the strength to bear any hardship for the love of Christ. You may do many good things while you are healthy, but when you are sick, I do not know what you may do. Few people are made better by sickness, just as few people are made more holy by visiting churches and shrines.

Do not rely on friends and neighbors, and do not put off your soul's welfare to the future, for people will forget you sooner than you think. It is better to take care of yourself now and to send some good along ahead of you than to trust in the help of others. If you have no care for yourself now, who will care for you in the future? The present time is very precious. Now are the safe days. Now is the acceptable time. But how sad that you do not spend this time well while you have strength to gather the merit which will allow you to live forever! The time will come when you will wish for one day or one hour for changing your ways, and I do not know

whether you will get it.

Ah, dear friend! from what great danger can you free yourself and from what great fear can you be freed if you will always be apprehensive and respectful of death. Strive to live in such a way now that in the hour of death you may rejoice rather than fear. Learn now to place Christ at the center of your life, that then you may begin to live your life with Christ. Learn now to let go of all things that stand between you and Christ, that then you may go to Christ freely. Restrain yourself now, that then you may feel confident of your reward.

Ah, my foolish friend! why do you think of living a long life when you are not sure of even one day? How many people are tricked and are unexpectedly snatched away? How often have you heard it said that someone was murdered, someone else drowned, another broke his neck falling from a high place, yet another choked while eating, and someone else met his end while playing; one person died by fire, another from disease, and another was killed by a robber, and thus death is the end of all, and our life passes suddenly like a shadow.

Who will remember you after death, and who will pray for you? Do, do now, dear friend, whatever you can do, because you do not know when you will die, nor do you know what will happen to you afterwards. Gather everlasting riches while you have time. Think of nothing except your eternal well-being. Care only for the things of God. Make friends for yourself now by honoring God's saints and by behaving like them, so that when you pass from this life to the next, they may welcome you home.

Keep yourself as a pilgrim and stranger on earth, a person to whom the affairs of the world mean nothing apart from Christ. Keep your heart free and lifted up to God, for this world is not your permanent home; you are simply passing through. With heartfelt love, direct your prayers and sighs to

your eternal home, so that after death your spirit may be worthy to pass happily to the Lord. Amen.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you think about death? Often? Never? Once in a while? What emotions does the thought of death arouse in you? Are you afraid of death? Would you like to escape it? Ignore it? Repress it? Overcome it?
2. Do you carry around with you a particular idea about how, when, and where you will die? Do you have any particular hopes about the circumstances of your death? What would you do differently if you knew that today would be your last?
3. Is your life an attempt to escape death or to come to terms with it? Is death your enemy or your friend? Are you trying to run away from it or looking for ways to welcome it when it comes? What does your attitude toward death say about your relationship with God?

Chapter Twenty-Four

Introduction

This chapter looks beyond death to the judgment each of us must one day face before God. This final judgment is part of the Church's teaching. It reminds us that our actions in this life help to shape our final destiny and look to God as the final arbitrator. God's judgment, however, is not arbitrary. It is nothing more than an affirmation of

our own deepest loves and longings. If we have sought to love and to serve God in this life, we will continue doing so after death. If we have lived life only for ourselves, however, we will be destined to do so for all eternity. The doctrine of purgatory recognizes that most of us live life with mixed motivations and must go through a process of conversion after death before we are able to see God face to face. The author uses strong language and vivid descriptions to help us see that, whether in this life or in the next, the process of purgation involves every level of our humanity.

Of Judgment and Punishment

In everything you do, think of how your life will end and of how you will stand before God. Nothing is hidden from him. He cannot be bribed. He accepts no excuses. He will judge what is right. Oh, my poor friend, what answer will you give to God who knows every bad thing you have ever done—you who sometimes dread the glance of an angry man? Why do you not prepare yourself against the Day of Judgment when no one will be able to excuse or defend another, when each person's burden will be enough for himself alone? Right now your work is fruitful, your tears acceptable, your sighs heard, your sorrow satisfies and cleanses your soul.

A patient person undergoes a great and wholesome cleansing, who, while bearing injuries, grieves more for the evil of others than for his own wrongs; who gladly prays for his enemies, and who truly forgives them; who does not shrink from asking forgiveness from others; who is more easily moved to compassion than to anger; who remains disciplined; and who directs every part of his life to his quest

for God. It is better to wash away sins and to nip vices now than to keep them to be purged in the future. Truly, we deceive ourselves by our excessive self-confidence. What else will the fire feed upon but your sins? The more lax you are now and the more you attend to bloating your own self-importance, the more severely will you pay for it later on—and the more fuel will you gather for the burning.

In whatever ways you have sinned, in those same ways will you be severely punished. In hell, the lazy will be spurred with burning goads and the gluttonous tormented with great hunger and thirst. There, the luxurious and the lovers of pleasure will be drenched in burning tar and stinking brimstone, and like mad dogs the envious will howl their anguish. There, no vice will lack its proper torment. There, the proud will be filled with every confusion and the miserly will be in terrible need. There, a single hour of suffering will be worse than a hundred years of the most heavy penance here. There, there is no rest and no comfort for the damned, but here there is sometimes rest from work and we enjoy the solace of our friends.

Be anxious and sorry now about your sins, so that in the Day of Judgment you may be secure among the blessed, for then the righteous will stand firmly against those who have afflicted and oppressed them. Then, the person who humbly submits himself to judgment in this life will become a judge himself. Then, the poor and humble will have great assurance and the proud will quake with fear on all sides. Then, the person who learned to be a fool and to be despised for Christ's sake will be seen to have been wise in this world. Then, all troubles suffered patiently will be pleasing and all injustice will keep quiet. Then, all those who love God will rejoice and all those who do not will mourn. Then, the body that has been afflicted will be exalted more than if it had always been fed on delicious things. Then, poor rags will be splendid and fine clothes will be drab. Then, the poor cottage will be praised more than the gilded palace. Then,

steadfast patience will be more useful than all the world's power. Then, simple obedience will stand higher than all worldly cunning. Then, a pure and good conscience will bring more joy than learned philosophy. Then, indifference to riches will weigh more than all the treasures of the world. Then, you will derive more comfort from devout prayer than from fancy food. Then, you will rejoice more in silence than in tedious gossip. Then, holy works will be worth more than eloquent language. Then, an austere life and ardent penance will be more pleasing than all earthly joys.

Teach yourself to endure in small things now, that then you may be freed from heavier pains. Prove here what you can endure hereafter. If you can endure so little now, how will you be able to bear eternal torments? If a little suffering makes you so edgy now, what will hell do then? Surely, you cannot have both kinds of happiness: your every desire in this world and a share in Christ's reign in the next? If, up to this day, you had always lived with honors and pleasures, what good would it all do you if you were to die now? So, all is vanity except to love God and to serve only him, for the person who loves God with his whole heart has no fear of death or judgment or hell, because perfect love gives certain access to God. But to the person who has turned his back on God, it is no wonder if he fears death and judgment! It is good that if love may not recall you from evil, at least the fear of hell may keep you from it. But even so, a person who loses that feeling of deep and abiding love for God will not last long in goodness, but will quickly fall into the snares of the devil.

Imitating Christ

1. What consequences do your actions have? Do they affect only yourself? Those nearest you? Those with whom you have contact? Your community? Society and the world? Do you believe that they help to shape

your eternal destiny?

2. What are the signs of conversion in your life? Do you pray for others? Forgive them? Reach out to them? Look out for them? Do you do this only for your friends? For those with whom you do not get along? Your enemies? In what concrete ways are you going through a process of purgation? Do you think this process will likely continue after your death?
3. In what ways do you consider God to be your final judge? Does this final role he plays in your life make you fear him? Can the image of God as judge be taken to extremes? Does it help to know that God's justice is tempered by his mercy, love, and compassion?

Chapter Twenty-Five

Introduction

This chapter challenges us to be fervent and persistent in our search for holiness. It addresses professed religious, but can be adapted in appropriate ways to include anyone wishing to be a disciple of Christ. It reminds us that progress in the spiritual life involves resisting our evil inclinations and making zealous efforts to grow in the virtues, especially those we are most in need of. It encourages us to trust in God in all things and to never lose hope in the promises of Christ's redemption. The author encourages those in the religious life to be

faithful to the obligations of their state in life. His words challenge us to be mindful of our own responsibilities before God and to carry them out with extreme care and diligence.

Of Improving Our Lives

Be watchful and diligent in God's service, and often think over why you chose to serve Christ in the first place. Was it not that you might live for God and become a spiritual person? Be fervent, then, in going forward, for you will soon receive the reward of your labors, and then there will be no more fear or sorrow in you. By working a little now, you will find great rest later; indeed, you will find endless joy. If you remain faithful and fervent in what you do, God will doubtless be faithful and generous in rewarding you. You must keep good hope of attaining the victory, but you must not become overconfident, lest you grow lazy or self-satisfied.

There was once a certain anxious man who, wavering often between fear and hope and exhausted with grief, prostrated himself in prayer in church before the altar. Turning these things in his mind, he said: "Oh, if only I knew that I shall persevere." On the spot, he heard the divine answer in his own heart: "What if you knew this? What would you do? Do now what you would do then, and you will be very safe." Soon after, having been comforted and strengthened, he gave himself up to God's will, and his anxious wavering stopped. He no longer feared for his future; instead, he sought to know God's will for accomplishing today's good works. "Hope in the Lord and do good," says the Prophet, "and dwell in the land, and you shall be fed with its riches."

There is one thing that keeps many people from gaining ground and from fervently striving to improve: the dread of

difficulty, or more accurately, the effort of the struggle. Those people progress most in virtue—truly, they progress beyond all others—who make a valiant effort to overcome the things that are most troublesome to them, that work most against them. A person makes more progress and deserves fuller grace in those instances where he overcomes such obstacles completely and where he cleanses his spirit by doing so. But not everyone has the same amount to overcome and cleanse. Nevertheless, a person striving diligently to excel will make greater progress—even if he has more to overcome—than will another who is more even-tempered but less keen for virtues.

Two things especially lead to great improvement: the will to drag yourself from the things that will naturally harm you and the desire to pursue the good things that you need the most. You should also watch out for those things that irritate you in other people; when you see them in yourself, get rid of them. Turn everything to your advantage. If you see or hear good examples, imitate them. If you think something is reprehensible, be careful that you do not do the same thing; if you have done it, try to correct yourself quickly. As you watch others, so do they watch you. How joyful and sweet it is to see fervent and devout friends living together agreeably and being well-disciplined. How sad it is—and what a burden!—to see people stumbling along in confusion, not practicing their own vocation. How harmful it is for those same people to neglect the purpose of their calling and to shift their attention to affairs that are none of their concern.

Remember what you set out to do, and place before you the image of the Crucified. When you look into the life of Jesus Christ you may well be ashamed that you have not tried harder to be like him, even though you have followed the ways of God for a long time. A religious person who trains himself intently and devoutly in the holy life and Passion of the Lord will find everything he needs, and he will find it in abundance. He need not look beyond Jesus for anything

better. Oh, if the crucified Jesus were to enter into our hearts, how quickly and fully would we be taught!

A fervent, religious person takes all things and bears them well, whatever they may be. A careless and lukewarm person has trouble on top of trouble and endures anguish from every side, because he lacks inner comfort and cannot find it anywhere else. An undisciplined person is open to grave ruin, and a person who looks only for ease and relaxation in life will be limited in his spiritual development, for one thing or another will always displease him.

How do so many other people make do, especially those who are constrained so tightly under monastic vows? They seldom go out, they live apart, they eat the poorest food, they dress coarsely, they work much, they speak little, they watch long, they rise early, they pray long, they read often and they keep control over themselves in every way. Look at the Carthusians, the Cistercians, and the monks and nuns of various religious orders. Every night they rise to sing psalms to the Lord. You should be ashamed of yourself for being so lazy while so many others are praising God even before the sun rises! Oh, if only there were nothing else to do but to praise the Lord our God with all our hearts and voices! Oh, if you never needed to eat or drink or sleep, but could always praise God and could be entirely free to strive after spiritual things; then, you would be much happier than you are now, enslaved as you are by all sorts of necessities. Oh, that there were not such necessities but only the spiritual nourishment of the soul, which, alas, we taste too seldom.

When you come to this, that you look for your comfort from nothing but God, then you begin to know God perfectly; then, too, will you be quite content no matter what happens; then, you will neither rejoice for much nor grieve for little, but will commit yourself wholly and confidently to God, for he means everything to you. To God, nothing passes away or dies, but all things live and all things serve him promptly at a nod.

Always think of the end and that lost time never returns. Without care and diligence you will never acquire virtue. If you begin to grow apathetic, you will begin to do badly. But if you give yourself enthusiastically to your spiritual life, you will find great peace and feel the effort lighter through God's grace and the love of virtue. The person who loves God with all his heart and soul—and who faithfully and diligently acts on that love—is ready for anything. It is greater work to resist our weaknesses than it is to sweat at manual labor. The person who does not avoid small faults, little by little slips into greater ones. You will always be glad at evening if you have spent the day well. Watch over yourself, rouse yourself, chide yourself, and no matter what others may do, do not neglect yourself. The more self-disciplined you are, the more you will progress. Amen.

Here end useful reminders for the spiritual life.

Imitating Christ

1. Which bad habits or evil inclinations in your life do you find most difficult to resist? Why do you find it so difficult? Have you shared this difficulty with others? With God? Can you think of any concrete steps that might help strengthen your resistance?
2. What good habits or virtues are you most in need of? Why do you say this? Have you brought these needs to God? Have you shared them with others? What small steps can you do take to initiate a process of growth in these virtues?
3. Who is responsible for your growth in holiness? Does God's grace work independently of our own efforts? Does such growth require the presence of our own faithful and fervent efforts? Does it inspire in us the

zealous amendment of life?

Book Two

Suggestions Drawing One Toward the Inner Life

Introduction

The second book of *The Imitation* deals with “The Way of Illumination.” This stage of the spiritual life addresses those of us who have already made some progress in our spiritual journey. It presupposes the basic disciplinary instructions outlined in the first book and goes on to offer concrete suggestions (or “counsels”) on how we can deepen our relationship with the Lord even more. In twelve short chapters, the author stresses the importance of nurturing a close, intimate friendship with Jesus. Only when Christ abides in us can we submit our hearts fully to God and follow the way of the Lord with complete abandon. Such intimacy with the Lord manifests itself in a life keenly attuned to the Spirit (e.g., humility, joy, peace, purity, simplicity, gratitude) and engenders a close identification with the life of Jesus. Those who reach this level of Christian maturity have interiorized the structures laid out for them in the

purgative way and find deep meaning in “the royal way of the cross.”

Chapter One

Introduction

This chapter highlights the importance of the interior life for Christ’s disciples. It asks us to prepare a fit dwelling place for Jesus in our hearts, one that will give us an intimate experiential knowledge of him. Only when we are interiorly united with Jesus in the inner sanctum of our hearts will we be able to enter more deeply into the depths of his love. Only when Jesus dwells in our hearts can we even begin to hope to dwell in his. The interior life is all about friendship with Christ. It bids us to begin each day with the renewed hope of entering more deeply into the mystery God’s love. Our imitation of Christ is not a mere conforming to externals, but the entrance into a personal relationship which changes our entire outlook on life.

Of God Speaking within You

“The kingdom of God is within you,” says the Lord. Turn to the Lord with your whole heart, let him be the most important part of your life, and your soul will find rest. If you put God first, you will see his kingdom blossom within you, for the kingdom of God is living in peace and joy with the Holy Spirit, a thing not given to those who do not yearn

for him with all their hearts. Christ will come to you and comfort you if you prepare a worthy place for him in your heart. All his glory and beauty lies within you, and he finds great delight in living there. He often visits the person who has a rich inner life, holding sweet conversation with him, granting delightful comfort, much peace and intimate friendship.

So get up, faithful soul, and prepare your heart for this Bridegroom so that he will want to come to you and live in your heart, for he says: "If anyone loves me he will keep my word, and we shall come to him, and we shall make our home with him." Make room for Christ, then, and place him at the center of your life. When he alone rests there, you will have great wealth, and he will be all you need. He will care for you, and he will provide for you faithfully in everything; you will not have to depend on anyone else, for people soon change and they fall short of your expectations before you know it. Only Christ remains constant forever, and he will stand by you to the very end.

Do not rely too heavily on other people, for, like all of us, they have their flaws and foibles. Even if you love someone very much, and that person has been a great blessing to you, do not be disappointed if sometimes the two of you disagree. Those who are your greatest help today may not be tomorrow; their needs change, and so do yours. Place all your trust in God; worship and love him. He will defend you and do what is best for you. This world is not your permanent home; wherever you may be you are a stranger, a pilgrim passing through. You will never find peace unless you are united with Christ in the very depths of your heart.

Why do you look around here to find peace when you do not really belong here? Your place is in heaven, and you should see everything else in terms of heaven. All things pass away, and you pass away with them, too. See that you do not cling to passing things, lest you become caught up in them and perish along with them.

Let your highest thoughts be with the Most High and your prayer be directed to Christ without ceasing. If you cannot contemplate high and heavenly things, rest your thoughts on Christ's Passion, and dwell freely on his Sacred Wounds. If you go for refuge to Jesus's Wounds and to the precious marks of his Passion with humility and love, you will feel great comfort in troubled times, you will not be too concerned about what other people think of you, and it will not be hard to put up with the humiliating things that they may say about you. Christ was also scorned by many people, and in his greatest need he was abandoned by his friends as others heaped insults on his head. Christ was willing to suffer and to be despised, and do you presume to complain of anything? Christ had those who did not like him and those who disagreed with him, and would you have everyone be your friends and supporters? How will your patience be rewarded if you meet with no hardships? If you never encounter opposition, how will you be Christ's friend?

Prop yourself up with Christ and for Christ if you wish to live with Christ. If just once you could perfectly enter the inner life of Jesus and experience a little of his passionate love, then you would not care at all about what you might gain or lose in life. You would even bear insults gladly, for the love of Jesus makes a person think of himself in a very humble way. A lover of Jesus and of truth, a genuinely spiritual person who is free from a troubled heart, can turn himself to God at any time, rise above himself, and rest joyfully in the Lord.

The person who understands all things as they are and not as they are said to be, is truly wise and is taught more by God than by others. The person who knows how to walk by an inner light is not overly influenced by his surroundings, and he needs neither special places nor special times for prayer. A person who can quickly focus inwardly is at one with himself, because he never completely loses himself in his outside affairs. He is not distracted by such things, nor does

occasional necessary business sidetrack him, but he adjusts himself to such things as they come. The person whose inner life is well-ordered and set in place is not troubled by the strange and twisted things that people do. A person is hindered and distracted in life in proportion to the cares he clutters about himself.

If everything were right with you and if you were pure throughout, everything would work to your advantage. As it is, many things often make you unhappy and upset you because you have not successfully shifted your attention from yourself to God, nor have you let go of the things that the world has set in your path. Nothing so stains and entangles a person's heart as a love of material things that is tarnished by self-interest. If you could put aside all those distracting things that the world has to offer, you could then contemplate heavenly things and you would often experience a deep inner joy.

Imitating Christ

1. How would you describe your relationship with Christ? Would it be accurate to say that you know him personally? How did you come to know him? What led you to him? What keeps you in relationship to him? What weakens your relationship?
2. How does Christ abide in your heart? How do you know he is there? What signs does he give you? How do you read them? How do you know you are reading them correctly?
3. Can the inner life lead to excessive introversion? How can you tell the difference between the two? What signs should you look for? What preventive measures should you take? Is everyone called to nurture the

inner life to the same degree and with the same intensity?

Chapter Two

Introduction

This chapter reminds us that progress in virtue comes only to those who are humble. The author advises us not to be concerned about how others view us. The only thing that matters is that we have a clear conscience before God. Once we are absolutely honest about ourselves before God, we are able to put up with all sorts of trials and personal difficulties. God, the author tells us, reveals his secrets to the humble of heart. In doing so, he enables us to be at peace even in the midst of great trial and distress. This peace comes not from the world, but from Jesus, the Prince of Peace, who has suffered all things that we might have life in abundance.

Of Placing Your Life in God's Hands

Do not be too concerned about who is with you or who is against you, but do be careful that God may be with you in everything you do. Have a good conscience, and God will defend you well, for no one can hurt a person whom God chooses to help. If you know how to be silent and how to put up with your troubles patiently, without a doubt the Lord will help you. He knows when and how to free you, and so you should freely give yourself up to him. It is up to God to help us and to deliver us from all of our problems and

uncertainties.

The fact that others know our faults and disapprove of them is often a great help in deepening our humility. When a person humbles himself for his failings he easily satisfies others and he appeases those who are angry with him. God protects and delivers a humble person; he cherishes and consoles him. God gives himself to a humble person; he bestows great grace on him, and after his humiliation he raises him to glory. God reveals his secrets to those who are humble, and he sweetly draws them and calls them to himself. The humble person in the midst of trouble is filled with peace, for he depends on God alone. Do not think that you have made any progress unless you feel truly humble before God and others.

Imitating Christ

1. Is God with you in all you do? How is he with you? Are you conscious of his presence with you? Only peripherally aware? What does he do with you? What does he not do? Is he with you at certain times more than others?
2. Why is having a good conscience so important for the inner life? Is there a connection between the moral and spiritual life? What happens when they are separated from one another? Can you think of any instances in your own life where this has been so?
3. How do you know when you are in the presence of a humble person? What are the signs? What do you look for? Is an inner attitude of peace among them? Does being humble mean always being submissive to others?

Chapter Three

Introduction

This chapter highlights the importance of peace for the spiritual life. When we are at peace with ourselves we share it with others and often turn even difficult situations into pleasant ones. When we are not at peace, we are filled with suspicion and tend to interpret the actions of others in a negative vein. To be at peace with ourselves means that we have entrusted our lives to God and have given up control of the circumstances we find ourselves in. We seek not to impose our will on those around us, but to reveal the presence of Christ to those we meet. A peaceful person patiently endures the trials of the present moment in order manifest the kingdom of God in our midst.

Of the Good and Peaceful Person

Keep yourself at peace first, and then you will be able to bring peace to others. A person who is at peace with himself does more good than someone who is very learned. A person beset by conflicting passions turns even good things into bad, and he is quick to believe any malicious gossip that comes his way. Someone who is good and peaceful, on the other hand, sees the good side of everything. If you are truly at peace with yourself, you are suspicious of no one, but if you are unhappy and upset, you will be tormented by endless suspicions; you will not be at peace with yourself, nor will you allow others to be at peace. You will often say what you

should not, and you will leave undone those things you should do. You will often pry into other people's business and neglect your own. So, first keep careful watch over yourself, and then you may be properly zealous for your neighbor. You are quite adept at excusing and glossing over your own shortcomings, but you are unwilling to accept excuses from anyone else; it would be more just to accuse yourself and to excuse your brother or sister. If you want others to put up with you, you must put up with them.

See how far you still are from true love and humility? A truly loving and humble person does not know how to feel anger or indignation toward others, and if he does, he recognizes such feelings as his own weakness. It is no great thing to associate with good and gentle people, for this naturally pleases all of us; everyone prefers to live in peace, and everyone likes those who think as he does. But to be able to live peacefully with the harsh and wrong-headed or with the unruly or contrary is a great grace and a most praiseworthy and virtuous achievement.

There are some people who are peaceful themselves and who also enjoy peace with others. There are some who neither have peace themselves nor who leave others in peace; they are irksome to others but more irksome to themselves. And there are still others who are peaceful themselves and who try to guide others back to peace. Yet, all the peace we have in this life must be rooted more in humble perseverance than in a lack of difficulties. The person who knows best how to continue on patiently will remain at peace better than anyone else. Such a person is a conqueror of himself and a master of the world, a friend of Christ and heaven's heir.

Imitating Christ

1. Are you suspicious of others? Are you like that often? Once in a while? Do you like being that way? Would

you like to change? What could you do to free yourself of your suspicions?

2. Are you a peaceful person? More or less? A mixed bag? Would you like to be more peaceful? What could you do to become so? Does God have anything to do with it? Have you ever asked him to bless you with the gift of peace?
3. Have you ever been in the presence of a peaceful person? Did that peace radiate out from him or her? Did it touch you in some way? Did it change the situation? Have you ever witnessed that person under stress? Did you learn anything from the way he or she handled it?

Chapter Four

Introduction

This chapter tells us that the heights of holiness are reached through purity and simplicity. When our intentions are simple and our affections pure, no good work is beyond us. These two qualities of Christian discipleship enable us to view all of life with a deep inner eye. Through them we understand the hidden meaning of things and are able to contemplate life's precious message. Purity of mind and simplicity of intention help us to strive for God and enjoy his presence in our hearts. The author describes them as two wings which lift us

above earthly concerns and lead us to our heavenly home. These qualities of Christian discipleship keep us from becoming lukewarm and indifferent toward God and neighbor. They help us to walk the way of the Lord with confidence and single-hearted devotion.

Of Pure Feelings and Simple Intentions

Two wings lift a person up from earthly concerns: simplicity and purity. Simplicity should be in intention, purity in feelings. Simplicity reaches out after God, purity catches hold and tastes.

If your heart is free from turmoil and conflict, everything you do will be for the best. If you seek for nothing but the will of God and the good of your neighbor—and if you act accordingly—you will enjoy true freedom. If your heart were right, then everything in God's creation would be a mirror of life and a book of holy teachings. There is no creature so small and worthless that it does not reflect God's goodness. If you were inwardly good and pure, then you would see and understand all things without difficulty. A pure heart penetrates both heaven and hell.

A person's judgment reflects his inner state. If there is joy in the world, surely the person with a pure heart has it, and if there is trouble and anguish anywhere, the person with a bad conscience knows this best. As iron thrust into the fire loses its rust and becomes white-hot, so a person turning wholly to God loses his apathy and is transformed. When a person begins to grow cool, then he shrinks from the smallest effort and willingly accepts comfort from wherever he can get it. But when he begins to master himself and to walk courageously on the path toward God, then those things that earlier weighed him down seem like nothing.

Imitating Christ

1. What does it mean to be pure of heart? Do you consider yourself as such? If not, why not? What would you need in order to be so? Can you be specific? Does maintaining purity of heart have anything to do with prayer?
2. What does it mean to be simple in your intentions? Removing the clutter from your life? Having simple tastes? A simple lifestyle? Does it mean being focused on the one thing that really matters?
3. Do you view life as a holy book to be pondered and contemplated? Do you believe that God's goodness is revealed in all creatures? In all places and circumstances? In all events? In every human heart?

Chapter Five

Introduction

This chapter emphasizes the importance of self-knowledge. It bids us to nurture a deep inner life so that we will be more aware of our various strengths and weaknesses. In doing so, we will be less apt to judge others harshly for their small defects. Self-knowledge also requires that we be watchful over our actions and slow to interfere in the affairs of others. God alone should be the focus of our efforts. The closer we get to God the more we will understand ourselves and the reasons for

our own shortcomings. The author reminds us of the difference between love of God and love of temporal things. Whenever the distinction gets blurred and we mistake one for the other, we stop making progress in the spiritual life and may even begin to move backward.

Of Paying Attention to One's Self

We cannot trust ourselves too much, because we often lack grace and understanding. The light within us is small, and we soon let even this burn out for lack of care. Moreover, we often fail to notice how inwardly blind we are; for example, we frequently do wrong, and to make matters worse, we make excuses about it! Sometimes we are moved by passion and think it zeal. We condemn small things in others and pass over serious things in ourselves. We are quick enough to feel it when others hurt us—and we even harbor those feelings—but we do not notice how much we hurt others. A person who honestly examines his own behavior would never judge other people harshly.

An inward person puts the care of his own soul before all other cares, and a person who attends to himself does not gossip about others. You will never be inward and devout unless you stop talking about other people and start watching over yourself. If you are utterly intent on the state of your own soul and on God, you will not pay so much attention to what other people are doing. When you are not minding your own business, what are you doing? And when you have endlessly meddled in other people's affairs, what will you have gained, having neglected your own soul? If you wish to have peace and true wholeness, you must set aside everything else and tend to your own affairs. You will make great spiritual progress if you keep your nose out of other people's business; you will surely fail if you do not.

Let nothing seem great, high, pleasing or agreeable to you, except God alone and what comes from God. Consider it hollow comfort whatever comes from anything else. The soul that loves God sets little value on anything less than God. God alone, eternal and measureless, fills all. He is the soul's comfort and true joy.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you criticize others for the very same faults that you yourself possess? Are you even aware that you possess them? If so, to what degree? How does knowledge of one's faults affect your reaction to the faults of others?
2. How does your inner life affect your outward actions? Does it do so in constructive or destructive ways? How can you tell the difference?
3. Is God the main focus of your life? Do you sometimes allow temporal cares and concerns to take his place? What happens to you when you do? How do you get back on track?

Chapter Six

Introduction

This chapter extols the spiritual benefits of a clear conscience. Such a conscience helps us to face whatever hardships may come our way with courage and cheerfulness. It roots us in God, the ultimate reality, and blesses us with a happy, quiet, and peaceful heart. A

person with a clear conscience knows that God looks into our hearts and weighs the motives for our actions. Such a person knows that seeking to do what is good is a way of putting one's complete and utter trust in God. To walk with a clear conscience is to walk with God by the inner light that he provides. That light leads us away from false attachments and enables us to live for God in simple peace and contentment.

Of the Joy of a Good Conscience

A good conscience is the best thing a person can have. Have a good conscience, and you will always have joy. A good conscience can bear many things, and it is always joyful in the midst of troubles; a bad conscience is always fearful and uneasy. You may rest easily if your heart does not reproach you. Never be happy unless you have done your best.

Those who do bad things never have true joy nor do they know inner peace, because "there is no peace for the wicked," says the Lord. And if they should say, "We are at peace, nothing bad will happen to us; who will dare to harm us," do not believe them, for God's anger will suddenly rise up, what they do will come to nothing, and all their plans will come crashing down.

To take pride in bearing hardships is not difficult for one who loves Jesus, for to take pride in hardship is to take pride in the Lord's cross. Material success and recognition do not last for long, and, in the end, they always bring sadness with them. If you want to be proud of something, be proud of your good conscience and not of what other people say about you. Your joy should come from God and be in God; your happiness should spring from the truth.

The person who wants true and eternal glory does not care for fleeting glory, and the person who looks for it and thinks highly of it clearly shows that he has little understanding or love for the things of heaven. The person who has great peace of heart pays no attention to either praise or blame. A person whose conscience is clean will easily be content and at peace. Praise does not make you holy; blame does not make you worthless.

What you are, you are. You are no greater than what God sees you to be. If you look after the state of your soul, you will not be bothered by what people say about you. People look at appearances; God looks at the heart. People consider what you have done; God clearly considers your intentions. One sign of a humble soul is that he always does his best and he always considers himself to be unimportant; a sign of great purity and trust is that he does not seek comfort from anyone but God. The person who does not look for praise from other people shows that he has given himself to God completely, “for not he who commends himself is approved,” says St. Paul, “but he whom God commends.” A spiritual person walks with God in his heart, and he is not won over by what others say and do.

Imitating Christ

1. What do you do when your conscience is bothering you? How do you know it is troubling you? Do you have remorse over something you have thought, said, or done? How long can you live with a troubled conscience?
2. How do you know when you have a clear conscience? What should you look for? What are the signs? A sense of inner freedom? Peace of mind? Joy and contentment? What do you do to insure this peaceful

state of mind endures?

3. How does a person move from a troubled conscience to a clear one? What do you do? Open your heart and mind to the person you have offended? Open your heart and mind to God? Ask for forgiveness? Seek to make reparation? Make a firm decision to avoid such thoughts, words, or actions in the future?

Chapter Seven

Introduction

This chapter reminds us of our call to love Jesus above all things. It encourages us to open our hearts to him and to make him the very center of our lives. Once we embrace Jesus as a close, intimate friend, we have a firm foundation upon which to stand. Jesus, the author tells us, will never forsake us. He yearns to dwell within our hearts and wishes to commune with us on the most intimate and personal level possible. Jesus wishes to be our beloved, the bridegroom of our souls. If we wish this intimate covenantal relationship, all we have to do is seek him. If we fail to seek the him in this way, our lives will wither away with all else that fades from this passing world. The author places this fundamental choice before us and asks us to ponder it as if our life depended upon it.

Of Loving Jesus above All Else

That person is truly blessed who understands what it is to love Jesus and to serve him with deep humility. Jesus wishes to be loved above all things; everything else must come second. The love of anything other than Jesus is deceptive and fickle; the love of Jesus is faithful and enduring. The person who clings to anything other than Jesus falls with its falling; the person who embraces Jesus stands firm forever. Love Jesus and keep him as your friend. When all things fade he will not abandon you, nor will he allow you to perish in the end.

If necessary, you must be willing to let go of everything if Jesus asks it of you. Cling to him in life and in death, and trust yourself to his faithfulness. He alone can help you when all else fails. Your beloved will not share you with others—that is his nature; he wants to be first in your heart, as you are in his. If you knew how to disentangle yourself from your own confused feelings, Jesus would gladly stay with you.

You will find that whatever hope you have placed in anything other than Jesus is nearly a total loss. Do not trust or lean upon a wind-blown reed, for all flesh is grass, and its glory, like the wild flower's, will fade away. If you trust in appearances, you will quickly be deceived; if you look for comfort and gain in others, you will often be disappointed. If you seek Jesus in everything, you will surely find him, but if you seek yourself, self you will surely find, but to your own ruin. By not seeking Jesus, we hurt ourselves more than the whole world and all our enemies could hurt us.

Imitating Christ

1. What does it mean to love Jesus above all else? Does it mean that we must hate the good things God has given us? Detach ourselves from them? Simply recognize them for what they are? What relationship do you see between love of God and a genuine love for his

creatures?

2. Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus? An intimate one? How has it deepened over the years? Do you believe that he will never abandon you? What can you do that will deepen that relationship further? What will Jesus do?
3. How do you share your intimate relationship with Jesus with others? Through your words and actions? Through the way you relate to them? What would be different in the way you relate to them if you did not have this close, personal relationship with Jesus?

Chapter Eight

Introduction

This chapter continues the previous one on loving Jesus above all else. It goes further into the nature of the intimate friendship we can have with Jesus—if we but let ourselves. The author points out how our activities become less burdensome when Jesus is there with us, helping us to get through them. He also points out the great art involved in conversing with Jesus. This art of prayer is itself a grace which comes from God and which enables us to enter into deeper and deeper union with him. Friendship with Christ gives perspective to all of our other relationships. It frees us from unnecessary worries and personal entanglements and enriches us to a point

beyond our wildest expectations. Friendship with Christ is at the heart of the deep spiritual joy of his disciples.

Friendship with Jesus

When Jesus is with us, all is right with the world and nothing seems difficult; when he is missing, everything is hard. When Jesus does not speak to the heart, comfort is worthless; but if he speaks only one word, we feel great joy. Did not Mary Magdalen arise at once from where she was weeping when Martha said to her, “the Master is here and is calling for you?” Oh, happy hour when Jesus calls us from tears to spiritual joy!

How dry and hard you are without Jesus! How foolish and empty if you want anything other than Jesus! Is this not a greater loss than if you were to lose the whole world? What can the world offer you without Jesus? To be without Jesus is an unbearable hell, and to be with Jesus is a sweet paradise. If Jesus is with you no foe can harm you. The person who finds Jesus finds a good treasure—indeed, a good beyond all good; the person who loses Jesus loses a very great thing, more than the whole world. It is poverty to live without Jesus; it is wealth to live with him.

To know how to talk with Jesus is a great art, and to know how to cling to him is great wisdom. Be humble and peaceful and Jesus will be with you; be devout and quiet and he will remain with you. You will quickly drive him away and lose his grace, though, if you divert your attention to your own affairs at his expense. And if you drive him away and lose him, to whom will you fly, and who will you then seek as a friend? You cannot live well without a friend, and if Jesus is not your best friend, you will end up being heartbroken and desolate. You act foolishly, then, if you center your life on anything else. It is better to have the whole world against us than to hurt Jesus.

So, from among all those dear to you let Jesus alone be especially loved. Love all things for Jesus's sake, but love Jesus for his own sake. Of all the friends you will find, you should love Jesus Christ in a unique way, for he is the only one who will be good and faithful to the end. Through him and in him love friends and foes alike, and pray that each one may come to know and love him.

Never wish to be more highly praised or more loved than others, for this belongs to God alone who has no equal. Do not wish that anyone should love you and only you, and do not make the same mistake yourself; rather, let Jesus be at the center of all your friendships. Be pure and free of heart, and do not be wrapped up in any other person to the exclusion of Jesus. You should bring a pure, unfettered heart to God if you wish to be free and to see how delightful the Lord is. And truly you will never arrive at this, unless his grace guides you and draws you, so that seeing all things in relation to God, you may be united to him in everything you do.

When the grace of God comes to you, then you are strong in all things, and when it leaves, you become poor and weak, left, as it were, to be beaten and kicked about. You should not be dejected, nor should you despair at this; rather, you should stand with a steady mind toward the will of God and endure whatever comes to you for the praise of Jesus Christ. After winter comes summer, after night the day returns, and after a storm comes great calm.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you converse with Jesus? How do you do it? Are you good at it? What do you tell him? What don't you tell him? Does he listen to you? Do you listen to him? Do you consider such conversations an important part of your friendship with him?

2. How does your friendship with Jesus affect your daily activities? Does it help you in any way? If so, how? Without Jesus in your life, would your life be more difficult? How so? What does Jesus do to lighten the load of living your life?
3. Does your friendship with Jesus bring you joy? If so, how is that joy manifested in your life? Is it constant? Sporadic? A quiet inner sense? Do you share that joy with others? How do you do so?

Chapter Nine

Introduction

This chapter reminds us that the life of the disciple is not always full of inner consolation. There are times when the experience of intimacy with God leaves us, and we are left to face the trials of life with nothing but faith. The walk of discipleship is one of faith. It tests us and strengthens our resolve to follow in the footsteps of the Lord. For this reason, we must be prepared for the experience of loss. We will be ridiculed for what we believe. We will lose the respect of others. We will be scorned by some and laughed at by others. Even our friends may leave us. During our journey, we may even lose touch with the inner comfort that accompanies us at the outset. During such moments, we must call upon the Lord and trust in his providential care. The walk of

discipleship challenges us to rely on no one else but the Lord. Only he will see us to our journey's end.

Of Emptiness

When we feel at one with God, it is easy not to need others; it is difficult, though, not to need others when God seems to be missing in our lives. To be able to endure feeling rejection and loneliness, to continue on in humility, and not to think that you deserve far better is a real blessing, especially if you can feel this way for the honor of God, and if you do so willingly. Is it such a great thing if you are cheerful and devout when grace is clearly present in your life? Everyone longs for this hour! The person whom God's grace carries has a pleasant enough ride. Is it any wonder if a person feels no burden, being carried by the Almighty and led by the Supreme Guide?

We all gladly cling to some comfort; it is hard not to. The holy martyr, Lawrence, with his great friend and priest, Sixtus, overcame the world because he walked away from everything that the world set between himself and God. Yet, for the love of Christ he patiently bore separation from his dear friend, Sixtus. He overcame his sorrow at losing someone he loved by loving God; he chose to follow God's will instead of his own. Like St. Lawrence, you must also be willing to part with some dear friend if the love of God requires it, and you should not be so deeply hurt when someone you love must leave you. We all know that we must be parted from each other in the end.

We must each wage a long and fierce inner struggle before we learn to master ourselves fully and to focus all of our love on God. When we rely on ourselves, we easily slip into finding comfort in material things and in each other, rather than in God. But one who truly loves Christ—one who pledges himself to a life of holiness—does not fall back on

such things, nor does he seek warm, comfortable feelings; he prefers, instead, to endure great tests and hard labor for Christ. So, when God gives you spiritual comfort, receive it gratefully, but know it to be a gift from God, not something you deserve. Do not be puffed up with pride, overly glad, or vainly presumptuous, but be all the more humble because of the gift; also, be hesitant and prudent in all your actions, because this hour will pass, and temptation will surely follow.

When you no longer feel the comfort of God's presence, do not despair right away. With humility and patience, wait for the heavenly visit, for God will return a richer comfort to you than you had before. This is nothing new or strange to those who know God's ways, for the great saints and prophets of old often experienced such changes; whence, the Psalmist, feeling grace present in him, declared, "In my prosperity I said I shall never be moved." But when grace was withdrawn he added what he felt inside, saying: "You hid your face from me, and I became troubled." Yet, in the midst of this, he did not despair but prayed to the Lord all the more earnestly and said: "To you, O Lord, I shall cry and shall beg forgiveness of my God." Finally, his prayer was answered, and he testified that he was heard by saying: "The Lord heard and has had mercy on me: the Lord became my helper." But how? "You have turned my sorrow into joy," he said, "and surrounded me with gladness." If it happened in this way with the great saints, we who are weak and poor should not despair if we are sometimes burning with desire and sometimes not. The Holy Spirit comes and goes according to his good pleasure; whence, blessed Job says: "You visit him at daybreak, and you suddenly test him."

How can I hope then; in whom should I trust, if not in God's great mercy alone and in the sole hope of heavenly grace? For whether I am surrounded by good people, devout brothers and sisters, faithful friends, holy books, or even sweet singing and beautiful hymns, they all offer little help

—provide little flavor—when I seem to be abandoned by grace and left in my own poverty. When that happens, there is no better remedy than patience and submission to God’s will.

I have never found anyone, however religious and devout, who had not sometimes felt that grace was taken away or who had not felt a lessening of spiritual enthusiasm. All the saints were tempted at one time or another, no matter how caught up and enlightened they were, for a person who is not trained by some trial for God is not worthy of lofty contemplation. Usually, temptation is a sign of comfort to follow, for heavenly comfort is promised to those who are tried by temptations: “He who overcomes,” says the Lord, “shall eat of the tree of life.”

Divine comfort gives us the strength to bear up under adversity. Temptation then follows, lest we become proud of our goodness. The devil never sleeps, nor is temptation ever far off; therefore, do not cease to prepare yourself for the fight, for there are enemies on both flanks who never rest.

Imitating Christ

1. Have you ever experienced a period of darkness in your walk with Christ? What happened? What was it like? Did you feel lonely? Isolated? Abandoned? Did you share this experience with anyone? Did you share it with God?
2. What does it mean to walk by faith? What is necessary for such a walk? Are you able to walk in faith even without an experience of Jesus’ close personal presence? Are you able to walk the way of discipleship without the inner consolations that marked the first steps of your journey?

3. Why do we face such periods of darkness? What do they do to us? How do they change us? Do they mature us? Strengthen us? Purify us? Give us deeper knowledge of ourselves? Deeper knowledge of Christ and the cross he bears for us?

Chapter Ten

Introduction

This chapter encourages us to be grateful for all the gifts we have received from the Lord. It asks us to be mindful of those graces and to remember to thank God with a sincere and open heart. All too often we neglect to do so. We forget that God promises to bestow even more precious graces upon the grateful heart. As a result, we fall from grace for lack of thankfulness. The author tells us to be grateful for even the smallest graces we have received from the Lord. Only then will we be counted worthy to receive greater ones. Similarly, he warns us against over-confidence in our own abilities and exhorts us to be humble in our dealings with God and with others. The humble, patient person is especially favored by the Lord. Such a person will always be in God's grace.

Of Gratitude for God's Grace

Why do you look for rest when you were born for work?
Prepare yourself for enduring hardships rather than for

comforts, for bearing the cross rather than for joy. Why, who in this world would not gladly receive spiritual joy and comfort if he could always get it? Spiritual comfort surpasses any delight that you can find in this world, for all worldly delights lack true substance and depth. Only spiritual delights are joyous and honorable, born of virtue and poured into pure souls by God. But no one can enjoy God's comforts whenever he wishes, for temptation is never far off.

A false sense of freedom and excessive self-confidence are great obstacles to such heavenly visits. God does well in granting the grace of spiritual comfort, but we fall short in not referring everything back to God by thanking him. As a result, the gifts of grace cannot flow freely in us because we are often ungrateful to the giver, and we do not refer it all back to the source from which it came. Grace will always be given to the truly grateful, and what is usually given to the humble will be taken away from the proud.

I wish for no divine comfort that blunts the stab of conscience in my heart, nor do I aspire to a lofty contemplation that may lead to spiritual pride. Not everything high is holy nor everything sweet, good nor every desire, pure nor every affection, pleasing to God. I willingly accept that grace which makes me more humble and reverent, more ready to abandon myself into God's hands.

One who has been taught by the gift of grace, and has learned by the pain of its being taken away, will not dare to attribute any good to himself, but will rather admit his poverty and vulnerability. Give to God what is God's, and ascribe to yourself that which is yours; that is, thank God for his grace and claim for yourself alone the guilt for your sins and the punishment they deserve. Always take the lowest place for yourself and the highest will be given to you, for the highest does not exist without the lowest. The saints who are the greatest in God's eyes are the least in their own and the greater their glory, the deeper their humility. Full of truth

and heavenly glory, they have no wish for empty praise. Firmly rooted and confident in God, they can in no way be puffed up with themselves. Those who attribute to God all the good that they have received do not seek praise from others, but seek that glory that comes from God alone. Above all, they wish that God may be praised in himself and in all his saints, and this is their constant aim.

So be grateful for every little gift and you will be worthy to receive greater ones. Consider the least gift as great and the most common as something special. If you consider the dignity of the giver, no gift will seem small or unimportant. Nothing given by the most high God is insignificant. And if he should send you pain and sorrow, you ought to be thankful, too, for whatever he permits he does for our own good. The person who wishes to keep God's grace should be thankful when it is given, and he should be patient when it is taken away. Pray for its return, then be cautious and humble lest it be lost.

Imitating Christ

1. How do you feel when someone is ungrateful toward you? Disappointed? Angry? Sad? How do you think Jesus feels when you are ungrateful to him? Do you know when you are being ungrateful to him? What are the signs?
2. How do you normally express gratitude to another person? Through words? A gesture? A kind deed? How do you normally express gratitude toward Jesus? Through prayer? Fasting? By helping someone? Are gratitude towards others and gratitude toward Jesus somehow related? If so, how?
3. How can you grow in gratitude for the gifts God has

given you? What concrete thoughts, words, actions can you do that will convey to God a deep sense of heartfelt thanks. Does gratitude have anything to do with the eucharist, a word which itself means “to give thanks?”

Chapter Eleven

Introduction

This chapter confronts us with the demands of Christian discipleship. It reminds us of the unconditional nature of our decision to walk in the footsteps of Christ. It tells us that our acceptance of Christ means also embracing his cross. Many who call themselves Christ's disciples are only willing to follow him so far. There is a limit to what they are willing to give, and when they reach that point they suddenly lose heart. The author tells us that a true disciple of Christ must be willing not only to embrace the cross, but also to love it. To do so, however, means that we have become so converted to God that we are free of all self-interest. To be a disciple of Christ means to be totally oriented toward others. Only in this way will the crosses we carry point to the redemptive event of Christ's paschal mystery.

Of the Few Who Love Jesus' Cross

Jesus has many lovers of his heavenly kingdom these days, but few of them carry his cross. He has many who desire comfort, but few who desire affliction. He has many friends to share his meals, but few to share his fasts. Everyone is eager to rejoice with him, but few are willing to endure anything for him. Many follow Jesus up to the breaking of the bread, but few as far as drinking from the chalice of his Passion. Many admire his miracles, but few pursue the shame of the cross. Many love Jesus as long as no difficulties touch them. Many praise and bless him as long as they receive comfort from him. But if Jesus hides himself and leaves them awhile, they either complain or fall into a deep depression.

Those who love Jesus for himself and not for their own comfort bless him in every trial and heartfelt anguish, just as they do in moments of great comfort. And even if he should never give them comfort, they would still always praise him and always want to thank him. Oh, how powerful is a pure love of Jesus, untainted by self-interest or self-love! Can we not call all those people mercenaries who are constantly seeking spiritual comfort? Do they, who are forever thinking of their own comfort and gain, not prove that they love themselves more than they love Christ? Where shall we find a person who is willing to serve God without receiving something in return?

Seldom do we find a person so spiritual that he lives stripped of everything. Who can find someone truly poor in spirit and totally detached from all the things of this world? His price is well beyond that of anything on earth! If a person were to give up all his possessions, that would still be nothing. And if he were to do great penance, it would still be a little thing. And if he were to learn all knowledge, he would still be far off. And if he had great virtue and burned with a passionate devotion, still much would be lacking in him; that is, the one thing which is supremely necessary. And what is it? That having left all things behind, he must also leave himself—

totally abandon himself—keeping nothing of his selfish, self-centered ways. And when he has done all that he knows must be done, then let him believe that he has done nothing. Let him not be deluded when others praise him, but let him admit in all honesty that he is only a humble servant of God. As Truth himself has said: “When you have done all that is asked of you, say to yourselves, we are unworthy servants.” Then he will be truly poor and naked in spirit, and he may say with the Prophet: “I am alone and poor.” Yet, no one is richer, no one more powerful, no one more free than the person who can give his whole life to God and freely serve others with deep humility and love.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you love Christ conditionally or unconditionally? What are the limits of your love for him? How far are you willing to go for him? Has your love for him ever been tested? How did you fare?
2. Are you free of all self-interest? In what areas of your life is self-centeredness most present? Has it gotten better or worse in recent years? How would you like it to go? What concrete steps could you take to become more oriented toward others? Toward Jesus?
3. What is your attitude toward the cross? Something to be tolerated with patience? Something to embrace with resignation? Something to look for in earnest and to readily embrace? A mixture of these reactions? Which one holds the greatest sway over you?

Chapter Twelve

Introduction

This chapter is a meditation on the glory of the cross. It reminds us that no one can enter God's kingdom without undergoing great suffering. Jesus himself said, "Whoever wishes to be my follower must deny his very self, take up his cross each day, and follow in my steps" (Lk 9:23). The cross of Christ is the key to the kingdom. Through it, Jesus gives his disciples the choicest gifts of the Spirit. Everything is summed up in the cross and everything flows from it. We should not be afraid of the cross, since it is the sign of our redemption. We should welcome it as an opportunity to share in Christ's sufferings. We are too weak to do this on our own. God's grace, however, helps us and enables us to follow the way of the cross. In fact, Jesus has already gone before us. Even now he prepares our way.

Of the Royal Road of the Holy Cross

To many people this saying seems harsh: "Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus." But it will be much harsher to hear that final word: "Depart from me, you accursed, into everlasting fire." They who gladly hear and follow the word of the cross now will have nothing to fear later on when they hear of eternal damnation. This sign of the cross will be in the heavens when the Lord comes to judge. Then all the servants of the cross who, in life, conformed themselves to the Crucified Lord, will approach Christ the Judge with great confidence.

Why then are you afraid to take up the cross, the way that

leads to the kingdom of God? In the cross is salvation; in the cross is life; in the cross is protection; in the cross is heavenly sweetness; in the cross is strength of mind; in the cross is spiritual joy; in the cross is supreme virtue; in the cross is perfect holiness. There is no salvation for the soul nor hope for eternal life, except in the cross.

So take up your cross and follow Jesus, and you will go on to eternal life. He went before you carrying his cross, and on the cross he died for you, that you too may carry your cross, and that you too may die on the cross. If you die with him, you will live with him. If you join him in suffering, you will join him in glory. Listen closely. Everything is founded on the cross, and everything consists in dying on it, and there is no other road to life and to true inner peace than the road of the holy cross and of our daily dying to ourselves. Walk where you will, seek where you will, and you will find no loftier way above nor safer way below than the way of the holy cross.

Plan as you like and arrange everything as best you can, yet you will always encounter some suffering whether you want to or not. Go wherever you will, you will always find the cross. Either you will feel physical pain or spiritual pain. Sometimes God will leave you, and sometimes a neighbor will upset you; even worse, you will sometimes be a burden to yourself! You can find neither remedy nor comfort which can free you or relieve you, but you must bear it as long as God wishes. God wants you to learn to endure troubles without comfort, to submit yourself totally to him, and to become more humble through adversity.

No one feels in his heart what Christ felt in his Passion, except the person who suffers as he did. So, the cross is always ready and waits for you everywhere. You cannot escape it no matter where you run, for wherever you go you are burdened with yourself, and wherever you go, there you are. Look up, look down; look out, look in. Everywhere you will find the cross, and you must endure patiently if you

wish to have inner peace and gain eternal life.

If you bear your cross willingly, it will carry you and lead you to your desired goal where suffering will end, but that cannot happen here. If you bear your cross unwillingly, you will make a greater burden for yourself—and you must still carry it, in any case. If you fling aside one cross, you will certainly find another and, perhaps, a heavier one.

Do you expect to escape what no one has ever avoided? What saint was there in the world without crosses and afflictions? Not even our Lord Jesus Christ spent one hour without the anguish of his Passion as long as he lived. It was necessary that Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead and so enter into his glory. So why do you seek another way, different from the royal road, which is the way of the holy cross?

Christ's entire life was a cross and a martyrdom, and will you look for rest and happiness? You are deluded if you look for anything other than affliction, for our entire mortal life is surrounded by crosses. And the more we progress in the spiritual life, the heavier our crosses will be, for the pain of our separation from God increases in proportion to our love of God.

But one who bears many crosses is not without some comfort, for he knows the great rewards that will come to him by patiently accepting God's will. At the same time that he bends under the weight of his cross, his burden is changed into divine comfort, for he knows that God will reward him for his efforts. And the more a person's body is weakened by affliction, the more his spirit is strengthened by inner grace. Sometimes, through the love of conforming himself to Christ's cross, a person is so comforted by his trials and afflictions that he does not want to be without them, for he believes that the more and heavier burdens he can bear for Christ, the more acceptable he will become to him. For such a person, patiently living out God's will becomes a blessing.

It is not our strength but Christ's grace which can and does accomplish such great things in us. Christ's grace enables us to embrace warmly those things from which we naturally recoil. It is not in our nature to bear the cross, to love the cross, to discipline ourselves, to avoid seeking praise, to suffer insults willingly, to think humbly of ourselves, to appear humble to others, to endure adversity and loss, and not to seek prosperity as our first goal. If you take a look at yourself, you will see that you can do none of this alone, but if you confide in the Lord, he will give you heavenly strength and all that you have chosen to do will become easier. You will not even fear your enemy, the devil, if you are armed with faith and sealed with the cross of Christ.

So, as a good and faithful servant of Christ, brace yourself to bear the Lord's cross with valor; out of love for you he was nailed to it. Be ready to bear many hardships and every kind of misfortune, for you will surely experience them wherever you are and wherever you may try to hide. It must be so. There is no way to avoid it; you can only endure it patiently. Drink lovingly of the chalice of the Lord if you wish to be his friend and to share his life. Leave all divine comforts to God; let him deal with them as he chooses. As for you, be ready to bear up under afflictions and consider them to be great consolations. For even if you were to endure all the world's suffering all by yourself, it would still be nothing compared to the future glory that only a little suffering would earn for you.

When you have come to this, that enduring pain and sorrow for Christ's sake is sweet and pleasing to you, then think that all is well with you, for you have found paradise on earth. As long as suffering is hard for you and you seek to avoid it, all will go wrong with you, and the very trouble that you run from will hound you wherever you go. If you resign yourself to what must be—that is, that we must all suffer and die—you will feel much better, and you will find peace. Even if you were caught up to the third heaven with St. Paul, that

would be no guarantee that you will not suffer adversity. “I shall show him,” said Jesus, “how much he must suffer for my name.” So, it remains for you to suffer if you wish to love Jesus and to serve him always.

If only you were worthy of enduring something for the name of Jesus! What great glory would be yours! How much joy would you give to God’s saints! What an example you would be to your neighbor! For everyone praises a willingness to endure hardships, but only a few are willing to do it. So, you gladly ought to suffer a little for Christ; many people suffer much heavier things for the world.

Know for certain that you must lead a life that focuses less and less on yourself. The less self-centered you become, the more you become centered in God. You are not fit to understand heavenly things unless you resign yourself to bearing adversities for Christ. Nothing is more pleasing to God, and nothing is better for you in this world than to be willing to suffer for Christ. If you had the choice, you would choose to suffer adversities for Christ rather than to be comforted and put at ease, for you would be more like Christ, more like all the saints. Our worth and our spiritual progress do not rest on warm feelings and God-given comforts, but rather on patiently enduring great calamities and trials.

If there had been anything better, anything more suited or more useful to our salvation than suffering, Christ surely would have pointed it out to us by his word and example. For the disciples who followed him and for all those who wish to follow him, he clearly urges carrying the cross, saying: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” So, let all your reading and studying end on this note: To enter the kingdom of God, we must endure many hardships.

Here End Suggestions Drawing One toward the Inner Life.

Imitating Christ

1. Why is the cross so central to the way of discipleship? Why must we suffer if Jesus has already suffered for us? What can our suffering do that Jesus' suffering has not already accomplished?
2. Is the cross an important part of your spirituality? Have you underemphasized it? Overemphasized it? Struck a right balance? What is the relationship between it and the rest of the Christ event? Do these dimensions of the paschal mystery have concrete relevance for your life?
3. How do you take up the cross of Jesus in your daily life? Do you find it easy? Difficult? A little of both? Does Jesus help you? How? Would you like more help? Do you ever ask for it? Where does patience fit in with your daily shouldering of the cross? Where does God's grace fit in?

Book Three

Of Inner Comfort

Introduction

The third book of *The Imitation* presents the main contours of “The Unitive Way.” This stage of the spiritual journey is for those who have plumbed the depths of the mystical life and reached the summit of Christian maturity. By far, the largest and most substantial book of the treatise (comprising some fifty-nine chapters), it provides some very practical counsels for Christian living along with a description of the various “inner consolations” we are likely to encounter as our “spiritual marriage” with Christ deepens. The nature of this relationship comes to the fore in the author’s decision to present his material in the form of a dialogue between the Master (Jesus) and his disciple (the soul). This conversation touches such themes as the effects of divine love, trusting and resting in God, confiding in God, and the power of grace. The inclusion of material that would seem more appropriate in the purgative way (e.g., the struggle against concupiscence) and the illuminative way (e.g., hearing God’s Word within us)

reminds us that these earlier stages of the spiritual life are incorporated into rather than abandoned by succeeding ones.

Chapter One

Introduction

This chapter emphasizes the importance of listening to the still, small voice of God within our hearts. To hear this divine whisper, we must avoid the many distractions presented to us by the world around us and orient our senses totally toward God. This inward turn does not mean that we close ourselves off from others or try to escape our responsibilities in life. It enables us to sustain a constant dialogue with him and to foster a deep and abiding communion of mind and heart. When this takes place, we are able to sense the presence of the eternal in our midst and devote everything we do to the Lord. The peace of the Lord comes from this abiding sense of his presence in our hearts and in our midst. It reminds us of the source of all true happiness and helps us to experience that joy in the here and now.

Of Christ Speaking in Your Own Heart

Disciple:

I shall listen to what the Lord God will say deep within my

heart. Blessed is the soul that listens to the Lord speaking within and that receives a word of comfort from him. Blessed are the ears that are attuned to the soft whisper of God's voice and that ignore the buzzing of the world. Blessed indeed are the ears that pay no attention to outside clamor, but listen to truth teaching from within. Blessed are the eyes that are closed to outside things, but are intent on inner things. Blessed are they who plumb their own depths and by daily efforts prepare themselves to understand the secrets of heaven. Blessed are they who are completely free to attend to God and who have shaken off everything that stands in their way. Mark these things, my soul; be silent, and visit the quiet recesses of your own heart. It is there that you will hear God's voice.

Jesus:

I am your salvation, your peace and your life; live in me, and you will find peace. Let go of all passing things, and seek eternal ones. What are all passing things but enticements that lead you away from me? And what good are created things, if they cause you to be abandoned by the Creator? So, let go of all such things and make yourself pleasing and faithful to your Creator, so that you may find true happiness.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you listen to the still, small voice of God in your heart? How do you do so? Do you find it difficult? What does the divine whisper say to you? How have you responded to it?
2. When you listen to the silence in your heart, how do you know that God is speaking to you and not someone or something else? What criteria do you use to determine the authentic utterings of the Spirit of

God in your heart? Does peace and tranquility of soul have anything to do with it?

3. Does God speak to us only in our hearts? Can we listen for his voice in the events of the day, in the people we meet? If so, how so? What does it mean to listen to the sign of the times?

Chapter Two

Introduction

This chapter reminds us that God alone speaks to the heart. Prophets and teachers may speak eloquently of him, but he alone enlightens our hearts and reveals the inner meaning of their words. It is he who inflames our hearts and enables us to understand the hidden mysteries of the faith. Written in the form of a prayer, the chapter encourages us to ask the Lord to speak to our hearts. It reminds us that prayer and prayer alone will help us to nourish a deep, intimate, and lasting relationship with our Lord. If we ask the Lord to speak to our hearts, he will do so. It is not difficult to pray such a prayer. All we need to do is open our hearts to the Lord, ask him to speak to us, and entrust our lives to him.

That Truth Speaks Quietly to the Heart

Disciple:

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening. I am your servant; give me understanding that I may know your ways. Incline my heart to your words, and let your speech come upon me as dew upon the grass. In days gone by the children of Israel said to Moses, "Speak to us and we shall listen; do not let the Lord speak to us, lest we die." This is not how I pray, Lord. No. With the great prophet Samuel, I humbly and earnestly beg: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Do not let Moses or any other prophet speak to me. You speak to me, O Lord God, you who inspire and enlighten all the prophets, for you alone, without them, can perfectly instruct me, while they without you can do nothing. They indeed can utter words, but they cannot convey the spirit of those words. They say beautiful things, but with you silent, they do not set the heart on fire. They convey the letter, but you reveal the meaning. They pronounce the mysteries, but you unfold their secrets. They declare the commandments, but you help us to practice them. They point out the way, but you give us the strength to walk it. They work only from the outside, but you instruct and enlighten the heart. They water the surface, but you provide a rich harvest. They proclaim the words, but you give understanding to what we hear.

So, do not let Moses speak to me, but you, O Lord, my God, eternal Truth, you speak to me. If I hear your voice, I may not die dry and barren as I would if I were warned from without and not inflamed from within. If I hear your voice, may I not be condemned for hearing the word and not following it, for knowing it and not loving it, for believing it and not living it. Speak then, Lord, for your servant listens, for you have the words of eternal life. Speak to me to comfort my soul and to change my whole life; in turn, may it give you praise and glory and honor, forever and ever.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you believe that God can speak to your heart directly and without intermediaries? Do you believe

that he can inflame your heart, foster your growth in the Spirit, and enable you to understand? Where did this belief come from? How can it be deepened?

2. Do you ask the Lord to speak to your heart? Often? Never? Once in a while? If so, how do you do so? Do you do so with words? In silence? With a movement of your heart? Why is it important to ask the Lord to speak to us?
3. Have you ever closed your heart to the Lord? What was the experience like? How did you know you had done so? Did you do so consciously? Without realizing it? A little bit of both? What did you do to reopen the lines of communication?

Chapter Three

Introduction

This chapter is in the form of a dialogue between Jesus and one of his disciples. It shows us what an intimate prayer from the heart is like and provides specific words for those who find it difficult to pray to in silence or to formulate verbal prayers of their own. The theme of this dialogue is the importance of listening to God's word with humble attention. Jesus laments the fact that so few people take time out to listen to his words with silence, humility, and ardent love. He encourages us to put aside all vain and frivolous pursuits and to focus

our attention on correcting bad habits and growing in the virtues. The disciple's words, moreover, remind us that nothing can be accomplished without God's help and that holiness consists in humbly entrusting ourselves to God's mercy and grace.

That We Should Listen to God's Words with Deep Humility and Serious Intent

Jesus:

My dear friend, listen to my words, words of sweetness that surpass those of all the philosophers and wise people of this world. My words are spirit and life and are not to be measured by human understanding. They are not to be brought out to pass idle moments, but they are to be heard in silence and taken up with deep humility and profound love.

Disciple:

Blessed is that person whom you instruct, O Lord, whom you teach in your own way. By your teaching, you give him rest from difficult days that he may know you are with him.

Jesus:

I taught the prophets from the beginning and even now I have not ceased to speak, but many people cannot hear my voice, for they have chosen not to listen. They are more eager to hear what the world has to say than to listen to God, and they are more hungry for what the world has to offer than for what pleases God.

The world promises trivial things that last but a moment, and it is served with rapacious greed; I promise the sum of all

eternal things, and many people's hearts remain indifferent. How many serve and obey me in all things with the same care and attention that they give to the world and its masters? They should be ashamed of themselves. And why? Listen. For a small gain people will run a long way, but for eternal life many will scarcely lift a foot from the ground. They want to be paid for their every effort, and sometimes they quarrel shamefully over pocket change; they are not afraid to exhaust themselves working day and night for a small profit or for the promise of a promotion mentioned in passing. But alas! for a permanent good, for a priceless gain, for the highest honor and a never-ending glory, they shrink from the least sign of an effort.

They should be ashamed, then, those lazy and grumbling people who are more ready to lose their souls than they are to gain life. They are more joyful over an empty illusion than they are over the truth. Sometimes their hopes come to nothing, but my promise misleads no one, nor does it send away empty-handed anyone who trusts in me. What I have promised, I shall give; what I have said, I shall do, so long as a person remains faithful in loving me until the end. I am the one who rewards all good people and the one who says "yes" to all those who follow me. Write my words on your heart and earnestly reflect upon them, for you will need them in times of trial.

What you do not understand through your reading and studying, you will know when I come to you. I usually visit those I love in two ways: I mean, of course, in temptation and in comfort. And every day I offer them two lessons: one pointing out their faults and the other encouraging them to grow in virtue. The person who rejects me and does not accept my words does so with the full knowledge that on the last day it is I who will be his judge.

Disciple:

A Prayer Asking for the Grace of Devotion

O Lord, my God, you are all the good I have. And who am I that I dare speak to you? I am the poorest of your servants, a commonplace creature, much more poor and insignificant than I know or dare to say. Remember, Lord, that I am nothing; I have nothing; I am worth nothing, without you. You alone are good, just and holy; you can do all things; you give all things; you fill all things. Only that person who chooses to turn his back on you, do you leave empty and alone.

Remember your mercies, and fill my heart with your grace, you who do not want your works to be for nothing. How can I live with myself in this unhappy life unless your mercy and grace comfort me? Do not turn your face from me, do not delay coming to me, do not take away the comfort of your love, lest my soul be like a parched land, thirsty for you.

O Lord, teach me to do your will; teach me to stand in your presence in a worthy and humble way, for you are my Wisdom, you who truly know me, who knew me before the world began and before I was born into it.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you find it difficult to talk to God? In silence? With words? Do prayers written by others help you to communicate with God? Sometimes? All the time? Never? Does your prayer involve a combination of spoken words and appropriate silence? Which do you find easier? Which predominates? Can you make time for both?
2. Do you consider yourself someone who truly seeks to listen to God's Word? If so, what practical steps do

you take to listen to his word with sincere and humble attention? Is the time you set aside for prayer appropriate to your situation in life? Inappropriate? What can you do to listen more attentively to God's word in your heart?

3. What is your dialogue with Jesus, the Master, like? Peaceful and quiet? Disturbing? Dramatic? Intense? Who does most of the talking? Who does most of the listening? What kind of things do you talk about? Are there any topics you have avoided bringing up? If so, why?

Chapter Four

Introduction

This chapter continues the dialogue by focusing on the importance of seeking God in all things, truth, and simplicity of heart. Jesus warns us not to be impressed by good works and accomplishments. It is much more important to know one's weaknesses and to be conscious of all the various sins and bad habits that need to be rooted out of one's life. He also warns us of the danger of presumption, curiosity, and conceit. Because it is so easy to get entangled in our unruly passions, it is very important that we ask God to enlighten our minds and purify our affections. Only in this way will we be able to avoid the pitfalls of temptation and eventually come to

seek God in all things.

That We Should Live in God's Presence in Truth and Humility

Jesus:

My dear friend, walk before me in truth, and always look for me in the simplicity of your own heart. The person who walks with me as his companion will be protected from all evil, and the truth will free him from all deceit. If the truth sets you free, you will be truly free, and you will be unconcerned about what others may have to say.

Disciple:

Lord, it is true. Let it be done to me as you say. May your truth teach me, guard me and keep me until I arrive at my salvation. Let your truth free me from every wrong feeling and every confused thought, and I shall walk with you in great freedom of heart.

Jesus:

I shall teach you what is right and pleasing to me. With deep sorrow and regret, think of all the times you have failed me, and never congratulate yourself because you have done something good. The fact is you are a sinner, subject to and trapped by many conflicting passions. Left to yourself you always move toward nothingness; you easily fall to ruin; you are easily overcome, easily upset, easily weakened. Of yourself, you have nothing to be proud of, but many things ought to humble you, for you are weaker than you know. So, let nothing you do seem great to you. Let nothing seem grand, nothing priceless and admirable, nothing worthy of great praise, nothing high, nothing truly desirable, except

that which is eternal.

Let the eternal truth please you above all things, and let your own sinfulness always displease you. Fear nothing, abhor and run from nothing, as much as from your own sins; they should displease you more than the loss of any possession you may have.

Some people do not walk with me honestly, but led by curiosity and arrogance, they want to know my inner thoughts and understand the sublime mysteries of God, heedless of themselves and their salvation. I see their pride and curiosity for what they are, and such people often fall into great temptations and sins because of them. Fear God's judgments. Dread the Almighty's anger. Do not presume to probe the works of the Most High, but look into your own failings, into how far you have fallen short, and into how many good things you have neglected to do.

Some people carry their devotion with them only in books, others in holy pictures, and others in outward signs and symbols. Some have me on their lips, but little in their hearts. There are others who, having an enlightened mind and pure feelings, always yearn for eternal things, listen with a weary heart to the latest news and gossip, and deal with the world's problems, and their own, as best they can. Such people understand what the Spirit of Truth speaks within them, for it teaches them to subordinate earthly things to heavenly ones; to see beyond the concerns of the moment, and to long for heaven day and night.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you have an exaggerated image of yourself? Are you overly impressed with your accomplishments? Do you think of yourself as totally (or near totally) self-sufficient? Does your image of yourself correspond to the way God sees you? What do you think are the

similarities and dissimilarities?

2. Are you in touch with your weaknesses? Have you ever experienced the unruly side of your emotions? Have you ever been entangled by them? Seldom? Often? Once in a while? What are the sins and bad habits that you need to uproot from your life? Have you ever brought them to God in prayer?
3. What does it mean to seek God in truth and simplicity of heart? Do you think you do so? Always? Sometimes? Never? What would you need to do in order to have a more simple and humble heart? Are you willing to take the necessary steps to become so?

Chapter Five

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple addresses Jesus as holy lover and asks to be inwardly healed of all evil passions and inordinate affections. He offers a moving depiction of love's great power to heal and to transform. Desiring that love which inflames the soul and knows no limits, the disciple wishes to be totally immersed in God's love. He asks Jesus to make it happen, but understands that such love does not come without great suffering. The true lover must be willing to forsake everything for the Beloved and be faithful to him in every trial and adversity that comes along.

Of the Wonderful Effects of God's Love

Disciple:

I bless you, Father in heaven, Father of my Lord, Jesus Christ, for you have seen fit to remember me in my poverty. O Father of mercies and God of all consolation, I thank you for sometimes renewing my life with your consolations, I who am so unworthy of them. I ever bless and glorify you, together with your only-begotten Son and the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, forever and ever.

O Lord God, my holy lover, when you enter my heart everything rejoices within me. You are my glory and the joy of my heart. You are my hope and my refuge in the day of my distress. But because I am still frail in love and flawed in virtue, I need to be comforted and consoled by you. Come to me often and teach me the ways of holiness. Free me from all evil, and heal my heart of all confusion. Once I am healed and cleansed within, I may then be able to love you as I should; I may then be strong in suffering and steadfast in pressing on.

Love is a great thing, a great good in every way, for it alone lightens every burden and passes smoothly over all misfortunes. Love carries a burden without feeling it and makes every bitter thing sweet and savory. The noble love of Jesus spurs us on to do great things and excites us always to long for perfection. Love wants to soar to the heights and not be tied down by anything low. Love wants to be free, unencumbered and whole, lest its inner vision be clouded by any momentary gain or temporary setback.

Nothing is sweeter than love, nothing stronger, nothing more sublime, nothing more expansive, nothing more joyful, nothing more abundant or better in heaven or on earth. Love is born of God; in the end, it rests in nothing other than God. A person who loves may soar, run and rejoice; he is free and

nothing holds him back. He gives all for all and has all in all, since above all he rests in that one highest good, from whom all good springs and flows. He does not look at the gifts he receives, but he turns himself beyond all gifts to the giver.

Love often knows no limit, but exceeds all limits. Love feels no burden, shrugs off all labor, aims beyond its strength, and refuses to admit impossibility. Because love believes that it can accomplish anything, it does.

Love keeps watch, and sleeping keeps one eye open. Tired, it is not wearied; constrained, it is not bound; frightened, it is not terrified, but like a living flame or burning torch it mounts upward, passing through unharmed. Whoever loves recognizes this voice: "My God! my Love! You are all mine and I am all yours!" It is the cry of an ardent soul deeply in love with God.

Stretch wide my love so that I may learn to taste how sweet it is to love, to dissolve in love, to swim in it. Let me be gripped by love, soaring beyond myself through boundless passion and wonder. Let me sing love's song. Let me follow you, my beloved, on high. Let my soul, exalting in love, lose itself in your praise. Let me love you more than myself, and let me love myself only for love of you. Let me love you in all others who truly love you, as the law of love, which shines from you, commands.

Love is swift, honest, devout, joyous and pleasing; love is strong, patient, faithful, prudent, longsuffering, courageous. Love is never self-seeking, for when we seek ourselves, we abandon love. Love is watchful, humble and upright; it is not soft, not frivolous, not given to empty things; it is sober, chaste, steadfast, calm, and it always stays alert. Love is submissive and obedient; it is ordinary and insignificant in its own eyes, devout and grateful to God, always trusting and hoping in him, even when it cannot taste him, for one does not know love without pain.

The person who is not ready to suffer all things and to do all

things that his beloved asks, does not deserve to be called a lover. For the sake of the beloved, a lover should willingly embrace every hardship and bitterness and not turn away from his beloved when things go wrong.

Imitating Christ

1. Is your relationship with Jesus unique in all the world? What makes it so special? What makes it similar to other people's relationship to him? Can your relationship with Jesus be deeper? More intimate?
2. What does the spousal image of "the Beloved" say to you about the degree of intimacy that can be shared between Jesus and his disciples? Do you share that deep degree intimacy with Jesus? Would you like to share it?
3. Why does Jesus link the love of the beloved to suffering? Can such suffering be avoided? Postponed? Overcome? What is the relationship between the love of the beloved and the love of the cross? The love of the cross and the joy of the resurrection?

Chapter Six

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus answers the disciple, centering on the characteristics of a true lover. Such a person is brave and not afraid to resist temptation. Such a lover is also wise for valuing the love of the giver rather than the gift of the lover. To become a true lover, we must be

ready to resist the temptations of the evil one and focus all one's energies on the saving power of the Lord. Like good soldiers, we will not get discouraged when overcome by human weakness, but will call upon the name of the Lord and rely ever more on God's abundant grace.

Of the Proof of a True Lover

Jesus:

My dear friend, you are not yet a courageous and wise lover.

Disciple:

Why, Lord?

Jesus:

Because at the least little hardship you drop what you are doing and you impatiently look around for a word of comfort from anyone who happens to be close at hand. A courageous lover remains firm in the midst of temptation and does not cave in to the cunning suggestions of the enemy. As I please you in good times, so I shall not displease you in bad times.

The wise lover does not consider so much the lover's gift, as the giver's love. He pays more attention to the giver's affection than to the gift's value, and he places less value on all gifts than he does on the beloved. The noble lover is not satisfied with the gift, but he desires me above all gifts. So all is not lost if you sometimes feel less affectionate toward me and my saints than you would like. That good and sweet feeling which you sometimes experience is the result of grace being present, a little sample of your heavenly home.

Do not depend on it too much, for it comes and goes.

To fight against all evil thoughts that come to mind and to scorn the devil's urgings are signs of great virtue and merit. So do not let strange fantasies trouble you, no matter what kind they may be. Keep your resolutions firmly, and be faithful to God. Sometimes you may be suddenly seized by intense spiritual feelings and seem to soar toward heaven, and then, just as quickly, you may seem to drop back to earth, back to your own foolish thoughts. Such feelings are not illusions. Enjoy them when you feel them, and be thankful for them, but do not seek them out. Chasing after such feelings can consume you. Try, instead, to maintain a spiritual calm; in the end, it will help you more.

Know that the old enemy strives in every way he can to block your doing good and to keep you from your religious devotions: from honoring the saints, from devoutly remembering my Passion, from usefully recalling your sins, from keeping watch over your heart, and from firmly resolving to advance in virtue. He whispers evil thoughts into your ears, so that he may wear you out and frighten you, and so that he may pull you from prayer and reading. Humble confession offends him, and if he could, he would prevent you from receiving Holy Communion. Do not believe him or pay attention to him, even though he has often set his traps to ensnare you. Throw it right back at him when he suggests foul and wicked things to you! Say to him: "Get out of here, foul spirit; shame on you, miserable wretch! You are filthy to utter such things in my ears! Get away from me you disgusting creature! You shall have no part of me, but Jesus will be with me as a courageous warrior, and you will stand confounded! I would rather die and endure any pain than give in to you! Be quiet and keep still! I shall hear no more of you, though you continue to molest me! The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? Though an entire army may encamp against me, my heart shall not be afraid! The Lord is my helper and my

redeemer!”

Fight bravely, and if you sometimes fall through weakness, rise up again with greater strength than before, sure of my greater grace. Take care, too, to guard against self-satisfaction and pride. By these many people are drawn astray, and they sometimes fall into an almost incurable blindness. Many people have met their ruin through pride and self-reliance. Let it be a warning to you and a continuous source of humility.

Imitating Christ

1. Are you a brave lover? Do you stand your ground against the temptations that come your way or do you easily give in to them? Which kinds of temptations give you the most difficulty? How do you deal with them? Can you think of any practical ways of coping with them?
2. Are you a wise lover? Do you focus on the love of the giver rather than on the gift of the lover? Can you cite concrete examples from your life? Can you cite concrete examples from your relationship with God?
3. Are you a true lover? Are you loyal to your friends? Do you carry through on your promises and commitments? Do you remain firm in your good resolutions? Can you say the same for your relationship with God? How can you better this fundamental relationship in your life?

Chapter Seven

Introduction

In this chapter, the Lord instructs his disciple in the way of humility. He points out the dangers of being overly concerned with feelings of piety and devotion. Rather than paying attention to them, it is much better to focus our attention on the Lord. True progress in the spiritual life comes when we are able to remain patient and steadfast when such consolations have been taken away. Only then will we be able to recognize the need to depend on God at all times. Only then will we understand the importance of following the dictates of reason as well as the heart. Only then will we seek only the will of God and not overstep the boundaries set for us by God.

Of Protecting Grace with Humility

Jesus:

My friend, it is more to your advantage—and it is safer, too—to keep your private devotions to yourself. The way you worship God on your own is a great grace; do not flaunt it or talk much about it or think much about it. Instead, keep it to yourself, and be wary of it as a thing given to someone who does not deserve it. Never cling too tightly to these holy feelings, for they can quickly change to the opposite.

When you enjoy such grace, think how poor and ineffectual you are without it. Progress in the spiritual life comes not so much when you experience comforting grace, as when, with humility and resignation, you live patiently with its being taken away. When it is, you should not grow lazy in your prayers nor should you allow your other duties to slide.

Instead, cheerfully do the best you can, and do not give up on yourself entirely because your soul feels dry or your mind worried.

Yes, there are many who quickly become impatient or lazy when things do not go well with them. A person does not always choose his own path, and it is for God to give comfort when he wants, as much as he wants, and to whom he wants.

Some unwary people have brought themselves to ruin through their private devotions, for they wished to do more than they could. They did not consider how frail they really are; they followed their hearts instead of their reason. And because they presumed to do more than please God, they soon lost his grace. They tried building a nest for themselves in heaven; instead, they became poor and abject. Then, humiliated and poverty stricken, they realized at last that if they wanted to fly, they had to depend on my wings, not their own.

Those who are new and inexperienced in the ways of the Lord can easily be disappointed and broken unless they keep watch over themselves, as wise people advise. But if they choose to follow their own feelings rather than the experience of others, they will jeopardize reaching their goal—that is, as long as they are unwilling to set aside their presumption. People who think themselves wise are seldom humble enough to allow others to guide them. It is better to be stupid and slow and to be humble about it, than to possess vast knowledge and to be smug about it. It is better for you to have a little than a lot, if a lot only makes you proud.

The person who takes spiritual joy for granted, oblivious of his former poverty and the chaste fear of losing what little grace he has, lacks discretion. Neither does a person show enough courage, who caves in to despair at the time of adversity, thinking thoughts and harboring feelings that show less trust in me than he should.

A person who wishes to be too secure in time of peace will often be depressed and afraid in time of war. If you knew how to stay always humble and small in your own eyes and how to tame and direct your spirit, you would not so easily fall into danger and encounter road blocks. This is good advice: When the spirit begins to grow warm, think what the future may be like with the light of my fire gone. And when this happens, remember that the light which I withdrew for a time, as a warning to you and for my glory, may return again.

Such a trial is often more helpful for you than if you always had things go your way, for a person's worth is not measured by whether he has many visions or spiritual comforts, whether he is deeply read in scripture, or whether he holds a high position. A person is highly valued by God, if he is grounded in true humility and filled with love, if he always seeks God's honor with purity and integrity, if he has a humble opinion of himself, if he sincerely dislikes his selfish nature, and even if he does not mind being looked down upon and belittled by others, instead of being honored.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you place too much emphasis on feelings in your relationships with others? With yourself? With God? Do you let your feelings get in the way of your better judgment? Do you act in order to maximize such feelings in your spiritual life? What are you like when they go away?
2. Do you expect too much of yourself? Do you try to achieve more than what you are actually capable of doing? Do you try to do more and to experience more in your spiritual life than God actually wants you to? Can you think of any examples? What can you do to

have more realistic expectations?

3. Do you consider yourself a patient person? Do others consider you such? Are you able to suffer the disappointments of the present moment for the sake of another? For the sake of God? How can you become a more patient person? Can you think of any practical steps that could help?

Chapter Eight

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple speaks of his nothingness before the Lord. He does so in a heartfelt prayer to God that overflows with a deep sense of the divine compassion. This prayer challenges us to look at our own understanding of ourselves before the infinite power of God's love. It reminds us that we can discover our true selves only by recognizing our own inner poverty. All that we have comes from the Lord. Without him we are utterly helpless. Only his loving embrace prevents us from falling into the abyss of self-hatred. His love alone helps us to discover who we are. It instills in us the hope that we can be lifted out of our selfish concerns and genuinely interested in providing for the needs of others.

Of Humility Before God

Disciple:

I shall speak to my Lord, though I may be dust and ashes. If I think myself better than I am, then you, Lord, show me that I am not. My sins speak out the lie, and I can say nothing to the contrary. But if I humble myself, think of myself as nothing, sweep away all self-importance, and account myself as dust, as indeed I am, then your grace will be mine. Then your light will be close to my heart, and all self-importance, no matter how little, will remain submerged in the valley of my nothingness and will perish forever. There, in my nothingness, you show me to myself—what I am, what I have been, and what I have become. I am nothing, and I did not even know it.

If left to myself, I am nothing; I am all weakness. But if you turn your face upon me, I am at once made strong and am filled with new happiness. It is wonderful that I am so quickly uplifted and so kindly embraced by you, I who by my own weight am always sinking to the bottom. Your love does this. It freely goes before me and helps me in my many needs. It guards me from grave dangers, too. To tell the truth, your love protects me from so many evils that I cannot count them all!

By seeking myself, I lost myself; by seeking you alone, and by loving you with a pure love, I found both myself and you. And through this love I have more profoundly returned to my nothingness, for you, O sweet Lord, you treat me far better than I deserve, beyond all that I dare to hope or to ask for.

May you be blessed, my God, for though I am unworthy of all the good things you give me, yet your excellence and infinite goodness never cease giving them. Even the thankless and those who have turned their backs on you receive your blessing. Turn us back to you, so that we may be thankful, humble, and devout, for you are our salvation, our courage, and our strength.

Imitating Christ

1. Have you ever had a sense of your “nothingness” before God? If so, can you remember the precise circumstances of the experience? Where you were, what brought it on, who you were with, how long it lasted? What impact did the experience have on your life? Did it change your convictions or attitude of mind in any way?
2. Why is it important to acknowledge our nothingness before God? Does such a recognition change the quality of our relationship with God? If so, in what way? Are we capable of doing so by ourselves? What else is needed?
3. In what way has the experience of God’s love deepened your sense of who you are? In what way has it changed your sense of self worth? Is it possible to have a deep sense of one’s nothingness before God and, at the same time, have a strong conviction of one’s capacity to love and be loved?

Chapter Nine

Introduction

In this chapter, the Lord reminds his disciple that all things must be referred to him as their last end. Jesus is the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. All of reality comes out from and will one day return to him.

The true disciple hastens this process by offering everything for Jesus' sake. Not to do so is to seek oneself rather than the Lord. Jesus tells us to draw from the living fountain of life and to rejoice in God's blessings. His gift of charity enlarges the powers of the soul and casts out every kind of pettiness and meanness of heart. For this reason, we must give thanks to the Lord for his kindness and rejoice in him at all times. The Lord is the source of all hope and is to be honored, adored, and praised above all else.

That All Things Come From God and Must Return to God

Jesus:

My friend, I must be your supreme and final end if you wish to be truly blessed. If I am, your love will be purified and not be twisted back on yourself and on the things of this world, as it so often is. If you seek yourself in anything, you quickly weaken and dry up inside. Therefore, refer all things to me as to the beginning, for everything you have has come from me. Look upon it all as flowing from the highest good; that being the case, all things must return to me as to their source.

All people, small and great, rich and poor, draw living water from me as from a quick-springing well, and they who serve me freely and of their own accord shall receive grace upon grace. But the person who seeks fulfillment in anything but me, or who seeks happiness in some private good of his own making, will not find true joy nor a heart overflowing with love; instead, he will encounter a mountain of obstacles and anxieties. Therefore, you should not take credit for any good

qualities that you might have nor should you attribute any special depth of character to anyone else; instead, give God credit for everything, for without him we have nothing.

I have given you everything and I wish it all to come back to me, and I would like for you to thank me for the gifts that I have given you; this is a truth that makes pride vanish. If heavenly grace and true love become part of you, there will be no more envy or rancor or self-love, for divine love conquers everything and opens out the powers of your soul to encompass the whole world.

If you are truly wise, you will find joy in me alone and hope in me alone, for no one is good but God alone. Praise him and bless him in everything you do.

Imitating Christ

1. What does it mean to say that God is the ultimate goal of your life? Does it mean that you have to be conscious of him at all times? Does it mean that each and every action must be specifically referred to him? Is it possible to do something for God in a secondary, peripheral sense?
2. What daily practices do you think would help you orient the particulars of your day to the Lord? Is it possible that we can refer all things to God in a variety of ways? If so, what might they be and what ways are appropriate to you and your situation in life?
3. Is union with God the ultimate goal of your life? Do you do what you do for God? For yourself? A mixture of both? Do you wish to turn more and more of your life over to God? If so, what practical steps can you

take to do so?

Chapter Ten

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple speaks of the great joy of serving the Lord at all times. God has showered so many gifts upon us that they are too numerous to count: creation, salvation, contemplation, reconciliation, peace, friendship, love—to name but a few. Regardless of our call in life—be it priestly, religious, or lay—our response to these blessings often comes as a desire to serve. Even that is a grace bestowed by the Lord. God’s gifts are so wonderful that we sometimes feel more like the person being served than the person serving. There is nothing we can do to repay the Lord for his many blessings. All that the Lord asks is that we come to him with humble and sincere hearts that seek to do his will in the events of our lives. Only in this way can any of us claim to be his servants.

Of How Good It Is to Serve God

Disciple:

Now I shall speak again, Lord, and I shall not be silent. I shall say to my God, my Lord and my King, who is on high: “Oh, how great is the abundance of your sweetness, Lord, which you have in store for those who love you.” But what

are you to those who love you? What for those who serve you with all their heart? Contemplating you is a sweetness beyond words. Oh, how much you lavish on those who love you!

You have shown me the sweetness of your love in these ways: that when I had no being you made me; that when I strayed far from you, you brought me back again to serve you, and you taught me how to love you. O font of eternal love, what may I say of you? How can I ever forget you, you who have seen fit to remember me, even when I wasted away and became lost? You have shown mercy to your servant beyond all hope, and you have granted grace and friendship beyond all deserving.

What am I to give you in return for such grace? For it is not given to everyone to give up everything, to set aside the world, and to take up the monastic life. Is it a great thing to serve you, whom all creation is bound to serve? It should not seem so special for me to serve you. Rather, this should seem great and marvelous to me: that you stoop to accept in service one so poor and unworthy and count him among your beloved friends.

Hear me, Lord! All that I have is yours, and all the gifts that I use to serve you belong to you. Yet, you serve me more than I serve you. Imagine! heaven and earth, which you created for our use, stand before you, and each day they carry out your every command! And this is only a small thing. Why, you have appointed even the angels to serve mankind! But even more astounding is that you yourself have stooped to serve us and have promised that you will give yourself to us!

What shall I give you in return for these countless blessings? If only I could serve you all the days of my life! If only I were able to serve you worthily, even for one day! Truly, you are worthy of all service, all honor and eternal praise. You are my Lord, and I am your poor servant, who is bound

to serve you with all my strength and without ever growing tired of praising you. This is what I want; this is what I desire, and whatever is lacking in me, please add it.

It is a great honor, a great glory, to serve you and to hold all other things as unimportant when compared to you. Those people will have much grace, who willingly submit themselves to your most holy service. They will experience the sweet comfort of the Holy Spirit, who, because of their love of you, have cast aside all worldly ambition. They will gain great freedom of mind, who, for your name, enter on the narrow path and wish only to journey to you. O delightful and joyous service of God, by which we are made truly free and holy! O holy state of religious service, which makes us equal to angels, pleasing to God, terrible to devils, and commendable to all the faithful! O cherished and ever-desired service that wins the highest good and attains a joy that lasts forever!

Imitating Christ

1. How aware are you of the graces God has bestowed on you? Very aware? Very little aware? Not aware at all? Which of God's blessings do you appreciate the most? Life? Friendship? Reconciliation? Which graces would you like to have more of? Have you ever asked for them?
2. Do you consider yourself a servant of the Lord? If so, in what ways do you serve him? Are you a faithful servant? A grudging servant? A joyful servant? Do you feel more served by God than a servant to him? If so, how so?
3. What does the Lord expect from his servants? What does the Lord expect from you? Have you met his

expectations? Have you fallen short of them? If so, have you asked for his help? Do you believe that God can even bless you with the gift of joyful service?

Chapter Eleven

Introduction

In the chapter, Jesus instructs us in areas we are not yet proficient in, especially in how to tame the desires of the heart. He reminds us of how easily desire can become inflamed and force us to act against our better judgment. We must learn to deal with such feelings so that they do not get in the way of the Lord's will. To do so, we must weigh every desire and try not to act impulsively. Even good feelings can do harm when they are pursued with too much eagerness. For this reason, we must learn restraint so that feelings do not get out of control by way of excess or defect. Because they influence the body, sometimes even physical restraint is necessary (e.g., abstinence, fasting, exercise). Here, too, the measures used to control the passions, must be used prudently and with moderation.

That Feelings May Not Always Be What They Seem

Jesus:

My dear friend, you still have many things to learn which you have not yet fully grasped.

Disciple:

What are these things, Lord?

Jesus:

You should make my will your own, stop being enamored of yourself, and eagerly do what I ask of you. Enthusiasm often drives you to action, but take the time to learn whether what you do is for me or for yourself. If I am the reason, you will be quite satisfied with whatever I shall decide for you; if your motive is selfish, though, it will get in your way and burden your conscience. Take care, then, not to rely too much on what you want without consulting me. You may find that what at first seems like the right thing to do, in the end will leave you upset and sorry. Do not be so quick to follow every good feeling, nor so eager to avoid every bad one.

It is sometimes wise to hold yourself in check, even when you are doing good things. An all-encompassing passion can sap your energy, offend other people, and lead to discouragement when others do not share your interest. Sometimes you must use extreme measures to resist your enthusiasms, for you will be torn in two directions. In every case, though, talk with me, then follow the voice of your conscience. It will not lead you astray. Be content with little; be happy with what is simple; and do not grumble if things seem to take a different turn from what you expected.

Imitating Christ

1. What is your attitude toward your emotions? Positive? Negative? Neutral? Indifferent? Do you ever experience them as dangerous and unruly? If so, how

do you deal with them? What practical means do you use to tame them?

2. Can our emotions be too controlled? Can they be so impeded that they become repressed? If so, how do you know when the right balance has been struck between emotional excess and defect? How, in other words, can you tell when you have done too little or too much in dealing with your emotions?
3. What role do physical practices play in taming the emotions? A large role? A small role? None at all? Given the excesses of physical ascetical practices in the past, do you think it advisable to focus on physical discipline today? What balance in your life do you maintain between the physical, the emotional, spiritual, and social dimensions of your life. Given the integrated nature of human life, do each of these dimensions have something to contribute to a stable emotional life?

Chapter Twelve

Introduction

In this chapter Jesus and his disciple discuss the importance of longsuffering and patient endurance in the midst of life's trials, especially in the struggle against concupiscence. Jesus reminds us that true peace comes from bearing the sufferings of the present moment. In

doing so, we unite our suffering to the cross of Christ and gain access to lasting treasures. Those who sit in the lap of luxury lose themselves in fading pleasures of the moment. They follow their lusts with abandon and fail to understand their dire situation. Through patient endurance we can overcome all of life's adversities. We will delight in the abundance of the Lord's consolations. Old habits will be overcome by better ones. The evil one will be put to flight by the power of heartfelt prayer.

Of Patience

Disciple:

Lord God, as I see it, patience is very necessary for me, because many troubles befall us in this life. No matter what I do to live in peace, my life cannot be without struggle and sorrow.

Jesus:

So it is, dear friend. But I do not want you to look for an easy peace. Think instead that you have found true peace when it has been well-tested by trouble and hardship. If you say that you cannot bear such suffering, how will you endure the flames of purgatory? Always choose the lesser of two evils; to avoid eternal punishment in the future, do all that you can to bear present troubles patiently.

Do you think that worldly people suffer nothing, or perhaps only suffer a little? You will not find it so, even if you search among the most wealthy and self-indulgent. But, you will say, they have many luxuries and they do what they please, so they make light of their troubles. Granted, they have

whatever they want, but how long do you think it will last? Look, the rich of this world will vanish like smoke; in the end, no one will even remember them. Even now they do not enjoy their riches without bitterness, weariness and fear. The very things that bring them delight also bring them pain and sorrow. And rightly so. Because they live for passing pleasures, they cannot find lasting fulfillment. Confusion and bitterness touch all they do.

Oh, how brief, how false, how excessive, and how ugly is such a way of life. People do not know how drunk and blind they are! Like dumb beasts, for a trifling pleasure in this life, they rush headlong into spiritual death. Do not chase after such things, my dear friend. Turn away from your self-centered desires, find joy in me, and I will give you what your heart truly desires. In fact, if you wish to know real delight and comfort, walk away from anything that stands between you and me. The more often you place me at the center of your life, the more often will you feel great comfort and sweetness.

But at first you will feel sorrow and conflict. A deep-rooted habit will resist, but it will be overcome by a better habit. You may grumble, but spiritual warmth will win you over. The old serpent will tempt you and entice you, but he will be sent packing by prayer, and if you do some useful work in the meantime, you will block his chief approach.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you consider yourself a patient person? Are you able to put up with unexpected disappointments? Or do you get easily upset and irritated when things do not go your way? Would you like to become a more patient person? What practical steps can you take to become one?
2. What does it mean to endure the sufferings of the

present moment? Simply put up with them? Pretend they do not exist? Actively seek to overcome them? How do you normally respond to them? Can patience mean different things at different times? How does one determine the appropriate response to the sufferings of the moment?

3. Do you get easily discouraged when you are unable to change deeply rooted habits? Can you name any of these habits specifically? Have you brought your desire to change them to God in prayer? Have you asked God for the patience to put up with the suffering they give you? Do you believe that God will one day uproot them?

Chapter Thirteen

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus teaches his disciple about submitting one's will to God. Humble obedience to the Father's will was the way chosen by Jesus when he entered our world and became a man. It is also the way that all of his disciples are called to walk. Obedience means listening with an open heart to those in authority. It does not mean going against our conscience or acting blindly to every whim of those in command. On the contrary, it asks all sides involved to be conscious of their responsibility to discern God's will through dialogue,

listening, and mutual respect. It was through his obedience to the Father's will that Jesus became an instrument of humanity's redemption. It is through our obedience to Jesus that we grow in holiness and walk in the Spirit. Although obedience will manifest itself differently in each vocational state (i.e., priests, religious, and laity), it remains a fundamental virtue of Christian discipleship.

Of Obedience and Humility

Jesus:

My dear friend, if a person living under monastic vows shrinks from obedience, he also shrinks from God's grace. Likewise, if a person living the monastic life seeks only what is best for himself, he does so at the expense of the common good. If such a person does not freely and willingly submit himself to his superior, it is a sign that he has not come very far in his vocation. So, learn to obey your superior promptly if you wish to progress. The old enemy is more quickly overcome if your own heart is not in shambles.

When you are not in perfect harmony with yourself, you are your own worst enemy. You must do away with every trace of self-centeredness, if you wish to overcome your weaknesses. It is your stubborn self-will that stands in the way of your obedience. Why is it so remarkable if you, who are dust and nothingness, submit yourself to another person for God's sake, when I, the Almighty and Most High, who created all things out of nothing, humbly subjected myself to others for you? I became the most humble and abject of all, so that you might conquer your pride through my humility.

So, learn to obey, dust. Learn to humble yourself, earth and clay, and to think of others before you think of yourself. Learn to live in obedience, whether you like it or not. Stamp out your self-centered ways, and rid yourself of your swollen pride. Do not feel superior to anyone, but place yourself at the service of all.

And do not complain. After all, you have offended God so often that you doubtless deserve hell over and over again! But because your soul is precious to me, I have spared you. I have done so in order that you might understand my love and come to be always grateful for the gifts that I give to you. I have done so in order that you might grow in true humility, not being concerned about what others may think of you.

Imitating Christ

1. What is your attitude toward Christian obedience? Positive? Negative? A mixture of both? Do you find it easy to obey or difficult? Once again, a little of each? Why is it difficult at times? What does obedience accomplish? Why is it so important for the Christian life?
2. Do you find it easy to listen? Do you find it tiring? Is it an active or passive activity for you? What makes it active? What makes it passive? Have you ever thought of Christian obedience as an expression of authentic listening?
3. What does obedience have to do with the imitation of Christ? Is it an essential element of it? An unimportant part of it? Is it possible to imitate Christ without listening to the will of God and trying to implement it

in one's life?

Chapter Fourteen

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple affirms the need for our total reliance on God. Our fallen nature prevents us from doing good. It keeps us entrapped in self-centeredness and prevents us from realizing our deepest hopes. Only the Lord can effect a transformation in our lives that leads to the wisdom and holiness for which we so deeply long. Nothing is secure without him. If he did not watch over us from one moment to the next, we would be completely victimized by our petty cares and insecurities. The more we recognize our utter dependence on God, the more we let go of our selfish concerns and allow ourselves to be held by his gentle, loving embrace. To depend totally on God is to walk in the Spirit and breathe the air of sanctity. These risks of discipleship far outweigh the dangers of the life we leave behind.

Of Seeing Ourselves through God's Eyes

Disciple:

You thunder your judgments over me, Lord, and all my bones quake with fear and trembling, and my soul is terribly afraid. I stand stunned and consider that the heavens are not pure in your sight. If you found corruption in the angels and

did not spare them, what will happen to me? The stars of heaven fell, and what can I, who am but dust, think will happen to me? Those whose works seemed praiseworthy have fallen to the depths, and I see those who ate the bread of angels delighting in pig slop!

There is no holiness, Lord, if you withdraw your hand, no wisdom if you cease to govern, no courage if you cease to save, no chastity if you do not protect it, no watchfulness if your holy vigilance is missing. If you abandon us, we sink and perish, but if you visit us, we are raised up and live. Why, we are trembling, but through you we are strengthened; we are lukewarm, but by you we are set ablaze.

Oh, how humbly and lowly I ought to feel about myself, and even if I seem to have goodness, I ought to think nothing of it. Oh, how deeply I ought to submit myself to your unfathomable judgments, Lord, where I find myself to be nothing but nothing, absolutely nothing. O measureless weight! O impassable sea! I peer deep within myself and I find nothing but total nothingness.

So where can pride hide? Where is confidence born of virtue? All empty boasting is swallowed up in the depths of your judgments over me. What am I—or any of us—in your sight? Shall the clay boast against he who formed it? How can a person whose heart is truly in harmony with God become swollen with pride? If your whole hope were fixed on God, and if you were to live your whole life for him alone, nothing in this world could inflate your pride or flatter your vanity. All those whose smooth tongues speak empty praise are nothing in themselves, for they will fade away with the sound of their own voices, but the truth of the Lord endures forever.

Imitating Christ

1. What does it mean to be totally dependent on God?

How would such a relationship affect your attitude toward time and space? Toward work and play? Toward solitude and prayer? Toward your relationship with yourself? With others? With God?

2. Do you do anything good out of pure motivations? Are they always mixed with some degree of self-interest? Some more than others? Do you believe that you can do nothing good apart from God?
3. Does God depend on you in any way? If so, in what way? Does Jesus? What is he asking of you? Is there something for which you have been especially chosen? Especially prepared for? Do you have an indispensable role to play in God's providential plan for the world?

Chapter Fifteen

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus instructs his disciple in the ways of prayer. He shows us how we should present our requests to God and emphasizes the importance of making God's will the basis of all our desires. It is not wrong to place our needs and desires before the Lord so long as we make our requests conditional on their being in conformity with his will. It is often difficult for us to know with certainty if a particular desire meets this criterion. When we pray, we must be aware that God's will for us may be different from our private discernment.

For this reason, we must pray with complete resignation to the will of God. The disciple's prayer at the end of this chapter is a perfect example of such a prayer and can be used as a model for those of us who have difficulty finding the right words.

Of What We Are to Do and Say about All Our Desires

Jesus:

My friend, speak about everything in this way: "Lord, if it is pleasing to you, let this be done. Lord, if it is to your honor, let this be done in your name. Lord, if you see that it will help me and if you judge it to be useful, then grant me this to use for your honor. But if you know it to be harmful for me and of no help in saving my soul, then take this desire away from me."

Not every desire is from the Holy Spirit, even though it may seem right and good to a person at the time. It is hard to tell just what is urging you on to want this thing or that. Many people are fooled in the end who at the beginning seemed led by a good inspiration. Therefore, whatever comes into your head as something you want, ask for it always with reverence toward God and with a humble heart. Above all, leave everything to me, saying: "Lord, you know what is best. Let this or that be done as you wish. Give what you want, how much you want and when you want. Do with me as you think best and as best pleases you and in a way which will give you greater honor. Put me where you want me and use me freely. I am in your hand; turn me around whichever way you will. See! I am your servant, ready for anything. Since it is so, I do not wish to live for myself, but for you.

Would that I could live only for you, fittingly and flawlessly!”

Disciple:

Prayer that God’s Will Be Done

Most kind Jesus, grant me your grace so that it may be with me and work with me and remain with me to the end. Grant me this: always to desire and to want what is most acceptable and pleasing to you. Let your will be mine, and let my will always follow yours and be in perfect accord with it. Let what I want always be what you want, and let me not want anything that you do not want.

Grant that nothing in the world might be as important to me as you are, and for your sake grant that I may serve you with deep humility and love, caring little for recognition or honor. Grant above all else, that I may rest in you and that my heart may find peace in you. You are the heart’s true peace; you are its only rest. Apart from you everything is hard and uneasy. Only in this peace that is you, highest and eternal Good, do I find sleep and take my rest. Amen.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you make requests of God when you pray? What kinds of things do you ask for? How do you ask for them? Do you equate your desires with his will for you? Do you bargain with God in order to get what you want? Or do you ask for them only if they be in accordance with his will?
2. Would you like God’s will to be at the basis of all your desires? Is it? Sometimes? All the time? Once in a while? Do you ever ask God to let it be so? Looking

back over your life has the desire follow God's will gotten stronger or weaker? What practical steps could you take to make it stronger?

3. Have you ever tried to pray as the disciple prays at the close of the chapter? If not, would you like to pray in this way? Are you afraid of praying in this way? If so, what are you afraid of losing? Or gaining? Do you truly believe that God alone is the heart's true peace?

Chapter Sixteen

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple ponders the importance of the beyond for happiness in the spiritual life. By focusing on the hereafter, we gain perspective and are able to appreciate more fully the blessings bestowed on us in present. Doing so does not mean that we seek to escape our present responsibilities or that we put less energy in our efforts to help others in need. It means only that we recognize that true happiness is a gift from the Lord and that its fullness will come to us only on the other side of death. Still, by looking to the beyond in our present life, we are able to carry a sense of the eternal in our daily activities. This sense of the eternal instills in us a reminder of the even deeper happiness that still is to come and brings perspective to our actions.

That We Are to Seek True Comfort in God Alone

Disciple:

Whatever comfort I can desire or imagine I do not look for here but in the life to come, for if I had all the world's comforts all to myself and could enjoy all its pleasures, they would certainly not last very long. So, my soul, you cannot be fully comforted nor perfectly refreshed except in God, the consoler of the poor and the protector of the humble.

Wait a little, my soul, wait for the divine promise, and you will have more than enough of all good things in heaven. If your appetite for present things is excessive you may lose eternal and heavenly ones. Use the things of the world, but long for the things of eternity. You cannot be fully satisfied by material possessions, for you are simply not made to enjoy them. Even if you owned every good thing in the world you would not be happy and blessed, for your blessedness and joy is in God, who created all those things. Your happiness is not in what is seen and admired by others but in what the good and faithful followers of Christ seek. Your happiness is in what the spiritual and pure of heart, those whose citizenship is in heaven, sometimes experience in this life, though it is meant for the next.

All human solace is empty and brief; blessed and true is that comfort which is acquired within from truth itself. A devout person carries Jesus, his consoler, with him everywhere and says to him: "Be with me, Lord Jesus, in all places and at all times. Let this be my consolation: to be willing to lack all human comfort, and if your consolation is also taken away, then let your will and the just trial you send me be my greatest comfort, for you will not always chide me nor will you keep your anger forever."

Imitating Christ

1. What do you understand by phrases such as “the beyond” and “the hereafter?” Do they have positive or negative connotations for you? Do they have any concrete relevance for the way you live your life? Does your sense of the beyond affect your daily activities?
2. What makes you happy? What do you look forward to? Does the eternal have any place in your answer? Does God? Is there a connection for you between happiness in this life and happiness in the next? Is there a separation? If so, is there any way of bridging the gap?
3. Is heaven a place or a state of being? Do we have access to it only after death? Can we have a foretaste of it in the present life? What does it mean to say that the reign of God is in our midst?

Chapter Seventeen

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus speaks to his disciple about the importance of trust. It is easy to talk about trust, but much more difficult to live in it. Jesus reminds us that he is looking out for our good and that we should not be afraid of placing our confidence in him. He asks us to let go of our plans and strategies and to rely on his providential care at all times. Letting go in this way frees us to seek his presence moment by moment in the circumstances of

our daily lives. Doing so enables us to walk with him and eventually to see the way he sees things. Jesus implores us to recognize the truth of his words and to ask for help to abandon ourselves to God in this way. This “equal readiness” or “holy indifference” will help us to trust in God at all times and places, regardless of the circumstances.

That We Should Take All Our Cares to God

Jesus:

My dear friend, let me do with you as I will; I know what is best for you. You think in human terms; in many instances you let your feelings affect your decisions.

Disciple:

Lord, what you say is true. Your concern for me is greater than any concern that I can have for myself. A person stands exposed to chance who does not cast all his cares on you. Lord, as long as my will remains firm and strong toward you, do with me whatever pleases you, for whatever you do with me cannot be other than good. If you want me to be in darkness, may you be blessed, and if you want me to be in light, may you still be blessed. If you choose to comfort me, may you be blessed, and if you want me to be troubled, may you be blessed just the same.

Jesus:

My dear friend, this is how you must be if you wish to walk with me: You must be as ready to suffer as to rejoice; you must be as willing to be poor and needy as to be rich and

wealthy.

Disciple:

Lord, I shall freely suffer for you whatever you choose to come upon me. With equal readiness I wish to receive from your hand good and evil, sweet and bitter, joy and sorrow, and I wish to thank you for all that happens to me. Guard me from all sin, and I shall fear neither death nor hell. As long as you do not cast me off forever, nor blot me from the book of life, whatever trials come over me shall not harm me.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you always have to be in control of a situation? How do you react when others are holding the reins? Can you work with them? Trust them? Do you have a difficult time letting go of your plans? Can you trust someone else to do the job for you?
2. Do you have a difficult time trusting others? Trusting yourself? Trusting God? What does it mean to let God be in control of your life? Do you find this difficult? Is it possible to trust someone whom you cannot see? How is trusting in God related to the walk of faith?
3. Does the phrase “holy indifference” make any sense to you? Is it a relic from the past or something to be sought after? What would “holy indifference” mean for you in the concrete circumstances of your life? Do you have it? Do you desire it? Does it have any relevance to your present understanding of the spiritual life?

Chapter Eighteen

Introduction

In this chapter, the imitation of Christ is described in terms of patient suffering. The dialogue has Jesus and his disciple discussing its essential make-up. Just as Jesus suffered insult and indignation for the redemption of humanity, so should we endure the trials we encounter in life without complaint. By uniting our suffering (however small) to Christ's we share in the mystery of the world's salvation. That mystery is rooted in the providential plan of God, which manifests itself in the incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is for this reason that the disciple says, "For your life is our path, and by holy patience we walk to you, our crown." The light of Jesus' example of patient suffering points out the way we should follow.

That We Should Bear Our Hardships Patiently after Christ's Example

Jesus:

My dear friend, I came down from heaven to save you. I took your troubles upon myself not because I had to, but because I was drawn by love. I did so in order that you might learn patience and bear life's miseries without complaint. From the hour of my birth until my death on the cross I was never without sorrow. I sadly lacked the material things of this world. I often heard many complaints against me. I meekly endured anxiety and shame. For my kindness I received ingratitude; for my miracles, blasphemies; and for

my teaching, rebukes.

Disciple:

Lord, because you were patient during your lifetime, in this perfectly fulfilling your Father's command, it is right that I, a poor sinner, should patiently put up with myself according to your will. As long as it pleases you, I should bear the burdens of this life for my salvation, for although this present life feels heavy, it already has been made deeply worthwhile through your grace. By your example and the footsteps of your saints, life has become more bearable and understandable. It has also become much more comforting than in times past under the Old Law when the gate of heaven was kept shut and the road to heaven seemed hidden and when so few cared to seek the kingdom of heaven. In any case, those who were destined to be saved in those days could not enter the kingdom of heaven before your suffering and the obligation of your holy death.

Oh, how many thanks must I give to you for kindly stooping to show to me and to all the faithful the straight and good road into your eternal kingdom! For your life is our path, and by holy patience we walk to you, our crown. If you had not gone before us and taught us the way, who would have taken the trouble to follow? Alas! how many people would have lingered far behind unless they had seen your splendid example? Look at us! Many people are still indifferent after hearing of your wonders and teachings. What would happen if we did not have such a light to follow?

Imitating Christ

1. How do you deal with suffering? Do you try to avoid it? Do you deny it when it comes? Do you embrace it? Do you try to unite it with Christ's? How difficult is it for you to suffer patiently for the sake of Christ? Does

such an attitude play an important role in your spiritual life?

2. Is patient suffering an essential element of your understanding of what it means to imitate Christ? If so, are there any dangers in such an understanding? What are they? Are there any strengths? What might they be? What role does patient suffering play in a balanced understanding of the spiritual life?
3. What does the example of Christ mean to you? Does it motivate your actions? Does it help to shape the way you approach others? Yourself? God? Do you consider patient suffering an essential element of his example to us? What other qualities or virtues are involved in it?

Chapter Nineteen

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus reminds his disciple that true patience puts up with all injuries, regardless of their size or point of origin. The small inconveniences that come our way do not compare with the sufferings of the martyrs. Calling to mind their sacrifices for Christ will help us to bear whatever crosses we are asked to carry. We should not be selective about which sufferings we will offer up to God and which we will not. The true sign of patience is the open acceptance of the suffering of the present moment for the sake of Christ. It should not

matter if these trials come from a superior, an equal, or an inferior. What *should* matter is the opportunity to enter more deeply into Christ's paschal mystery. After having listened to Jesus, the disciple asks for the grace to endure all of life's adversities.

Of Bearing Injuries and the Proof of True Patience

Jesus:

What are you saying, my friend? Stop complaining, and think of my Passion and the suffering of the other saints. You have not yet shed blood in the fight. Your suffering is little compared to those who suffered so much, who were strongly tempted, grievously afflicted, tried and harassed in so many ways. You must, therefore, call to mind the heavier trials of others so that you may bear your little ones more easily. And if they do not seem small to you, be careful that this is not due to your impatience. But whether they are small or great, try to bear them with patience.

The better you prepare yourself for suffering, the more wisely will you act and the more merit will you gain. You will find it easier, too, if your mind has been prepared for it and is used to it. Do not say: "I cannot tolerate these things from such a man nor should I have to put up with them. He has seriously hurt me and he has blamed me for things I never dreamed of doing. I shall gladly suffer reasonable criticism from someone else, though." Such a thought is foolish, for it does not take into account the virtue of patience nor him from whom patience will receive its reward. Instead, it dwells on personalities and the injuries they inflict.

He is not a truly patient person who is only willing to suffer as much as he chooses and from whom he pleases. The truly patient person does not care by whom he is tried, whether by his superior or by someone equal or inferior, whether by a good and holy person or by a perverse and worthless one. No matter how much or how often anything bad happens to him, and whatever creature in this world might be its cause, he takes it all from God's hand gratefully and considers it a great gain, for nothing suffered for God's sake, no matter how small it may be, goes without its reward.

So be prepared to fight if you want to have the victory. You cannot gain the crown of patience without a struggle. If you will not suffer, you refuse to be crowned, but if you want to be crowned, fight bravely and endure patiently. Without labor there is no rest; without struggle there is no victory.

Disciple:

Lord, may grace make possible what my nature seems to make impossible. You know how little I am able to suffer and how quickly I collapse when the slightest adversity rears its head. Let the endurance of any trials become lovely and desirable to me for your name, for suffering and affliction for your sake is most wholesome to my soul.

Imitating Christ

1. Are you selective in your patience? Are there certain kinds of slights that you are not willing to put up with? Certain kinds of people? Is this selectivity impulsive or premeditated? Is it justified in your eyes or would you like to change it?
2. If true patience bears all injuries, then is there any place for justified anger in the life of the disciple? Can you think of any examples? From your own life? What

does it mean to be patient with the anger of others?
With your own anger?

3. Do you ask God to help you to become more patient? Do you ask Jesus? How do you ask for it? What are the particulars of your prayer? Do you anticipate it by asking for it ahead of time? If not, why not?

Chapter Twenty

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple admits his weakness to Jesus and confronts his inability to change. No matter how strongly we resolve to change a particular attitude or way of acting, we can so easily become overwhelmed by our passions. Sometimes even the smallest incident can be the occasion for a grave temptation. We find ourselves taken by surprise and unable to direct our feelings and emotions toward the good. As a result, we find ourselves on guard and in a state of constant conflict. Temptations come in rapid succession. Sometimes we resist them. Sometimes we fall. In the midst of it all, life can become burdensome. We find little joy in our journey and wish it would soon be over, regardless of the outcome. The disciple opens his heart to the Lord and reveals his innermost desire to live entirely for God.

Of Admitting Our Own Weaknesses

Disciple:

I shall acknowledge my sinfulness to you, Lord; to you I shall confess my weakness. It is often a small thing which troubles and depresses me. I resolve to act bravely, but when a small temptation comes my way I find myself in great anxiety. Sometimes grave temptation springs from a trifling thing. And when I think myself fairly safe, before I know it, I am almost toppled by a gentle breeze. Therefore, Lord, look on my lowliness and weakness, noted by you on every side. Have pity on me and draw me out of the mire, lest I sink and remain totally submerged.

It is this that often strikes me again and again and embarrasses me in your sight: that I am so unsteady and weak in resisting my passions. And although I may not give in altogether, yet their chasing after me is trying and distressing to me; it is exhausting to live life in a daily quarrel. My weakness is made known to me by this: that abominable fantasies always burst into my mind more easily than they fade from it.

Most mighty God of Israel, zealous lover of faithful souls, look upon the toil and sorrow of your servant, and help him in all he tries to do. Reinforce me with heavenly strength, lest my darker side get the upper hand and take control.

Alas! what kind of life is this where trials and miseries abound, where everything is full of traps and enemies? When one trial or temptation passes, another comes, and even while one conflict rages on, a gaggle of others scurry in from out of nowhere.

How can a life be loved that is filled with so much bitterness, that is subject to so many calamities and miseries? How can it be called life when it gives birth to so many deadly and disastrous things?

Yet loved it is, and many cling to it desperately. Some people say that the world's values are deceptive and hollow,

yet these same people do not willingly give them up, for their lives are completely dominated by them. Yet, some things urge us to love the world's values, while others urge us not to. The pursuit of money, power and sex draws us to accept what the world says we should want, but the feeling of emptiness that accompanies getting them often begets a deep aversion to them.

Sadly, though, such values are terribly addictive, and they usually win over a person so completely that he counts it a delight to be caught in a bed of thorns. Such an unfortunate person neither sees nor tastes the sweetness of God, nor does he know the inner beauty of living in harmony with God's will. Those who strive to live their lives for God, though, see all too clearly how mistaken and deluded the world is and in how many ways it fools itself.

Imitating Christ

1. Are you in touch with your weaknesses? What are they? How do you deal with them? Do you ignore them? Try to hide them? Are you in constant conflict with them? Live with them?
2. Do you share your weaknesses with others? If so, with whom? Do you share your weaknesses with God? Do you do so often? What is your prayer like? What benefit comes to you by sharing your weaknesses with God?
3. Do you believe that God can help you to overcome your weaknesses? How strong is that belief? Strong enough to make it a constant focus of your prayer? Strong enough to enable you to live in hope? To what extent does hope enable you to deal with your

weakness?

Chapter Twenty-One

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple speaks of his yearning to rest in the Lord at all times. God is the supreme Good, our ultimate source of happiness. Nothing else comes close to what he has to offer us. Those who think otherwise are painfully mistaken. The disciple speaks of the Lord as the bridegroom of the soul. This imagery is deeply rooted in the saying of the mystics and reveals the depths of the intimacy with God to which we are called. All of us are called to rest in the heart of Christ. Christ, in turn, yearns to rest in our hearts. Such is the relationship between the bridegroom and his spouse. As the chapter unfolds, Jesus speaks of his love for his disciple and hastens to draw near to his soul. The disciple is grateful for Jesus' love and blesses the name of the Lord.

That We Should Rest in God Above All Else

Disciple:

O my soul, above all things and in all things always rest in the Lord, for he is the eternal rest of the saints.

Grant me most sweet and loving Jesus, to rest in you above every other creature, above all health and beauty, above all glory and honor, above all power and dignity, above all

knowledge and precise thought, above all wealth and talent, above all joy and exultation, above all fame and praise, above all sweetness and consolation, above all hope and promise, above all merit and desire, above all gifts and favors you give and shower upon me, above all happiness and joy that the mind can understand and feel, and finally, above all angels and archangels, above all the hosts of heaven, above all things visible and invisible, and above all that is not you, my God.

You, O Lord, my God, you are supreme above all things. You alone are most high, you alone are most powerful, you alone are self-sufficient and complete, you alone are most sweet and delightful, you alone are most beautiful and loving, you alone are most noble and glorious above all things. In you all good exists perfectly and at once; it always was and it always will be. Therefore, whatever you give me, other than yourself, or whatever you reveal or promise to me is far too little, is not enough, as long as I do not see you or fully embrace you. My heart cannot truly rest nor be fully content, if it does not rise above all gifts and all created things and rest in you.

O my most beloved spouse, Jesus Christ, most pure lover, Lord of all creation, who will give me the wings of true freedom to fly to you and to rest in you? Oh, when shall I be free to see how sweet you are, my Lord God? When shall I find myself so completely absorbed in you that for love of you I shall not be conscious of myself but of you alone, beyond all ability to understand or to measure and in a way unique to me?

But now I often lament and bear my unhappiness with a heavy heart, for many evils befall me in this valley of tears. They often upset me, sadden me and cast a dark shadow over me. They often get in the way and distract me, allure and entangle me, so that I cannot freely come to you nor enjoy the happy embraces that always await the blessed spirits.

Let my sighs and great loneliness upon this earth move you, O Jesus, splendor of eternal glory, comfort of the wandering soul. My mouth falls silent before you; my silence speaks to you. How long will my Lord delay in coming? Let him come to me, his poor servant, and make me happy. Let him stretch forth his hand and deliver me from all distress, I who am so greatly in need of compassion.

Come, come. Without you no day or hour will be happy, for you are my joy, and without you my table is empty. I am miserable. I am as one imprisoned and loaded down with heavy chains until you revive me with the light of your presence and set me free and turn your kind face upon me. Others may go their own way, but nothing else delights me nor shall delight me except you, my God, my hope and my eternal salvation. I shall not be silent nor will I cease to pray until your grace returns to me and you speak to me in the depths of my heart.

Jesus:

My dear friend, I am here. See, I have come to you because you have invited me. Your tears and your soul's longing, your humility and your grief-stricken heart have moved me and brought me to you.

Disciple:

O Lord, I called you and longed to enjoy you, and I am prepared to give up everything for you. You first inspired me to seek you; therefore, may you be blessed, Lord, you who have granted this favor to your servant, according to your abundant mercy. What more does your servant have to say in your presence except that he should humble himself before you, remembering always his own shortcomings and unworthiness? There is no one like you among all the wonders of heaven and earth. Your works are exceedingly good, your judgments are true, and by your providence you

govern the universe. Praise, therefore, and glory to you, O Wisdom of the Father. Let my mouth, my soul and all creation praise and bless you.

Imitating Christ

1. Where do you find rest? In a particular activity? In being with friends? In spending time alone? In spending time with God? Who or what do you consider your ultimate source of rest? In what way is your present life oriented toward it? What strengthens or weakens the orientation?
2. What relevance does the metaphor of Jesus as the bridegroom of the soul have for you? Do you like the image? Can you identify with it? What meaning is it trying to convey? Are there any other metaphors that convey a similar meaning and with which you can identify more closely?
3. Does the way you pray to God reflect in any way the intimate language used in the dialogue between Jesus and his disciple? If not, would you like to pray that way? Is there anything that keeps you from praying in this way?

Chapter Twenty-Two

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple talks about the many kinds of blessings that God lavishes on his people. It is

important for us to call these gifts to mind, for they help us to appreciate God's great love for us. All good gifts come from the hand of the Lord. We should not be jealous of those who have been more graciously endowed with natural talents and gifts. God disperses his gifts for the good of his body and has a special preference for the poor. For this reason, we are to rejoice in our poverty and give thanks to the Lord for whatever blessings we have received. To love God means to remember his graciousness and to be thankful when and wherever and in whomever it is manifested. Remembering God's blessings puts us in touch with God's generosity and helps us to act in a similar way with others.

Of Remembering God's Many Blessings

Disciple:

Lord, open my heart to your law, and teach me to walk according to your ways. Help me to understand your will, and with great reverence and diligent thought help me to keep in mind your kindnesses, both those given to everyone and those given especially to me, so that from now on I may suitably thank you. I know well and I fully admit that I am unable to offer you the praise and thanks that I ought, even for the least of your blessings. I am unworthy of any of the good things you have bestowed on me. When I consider your excellence my spirit wilts before your greatness.

All that we have in soul and in body and whatever outward or inward, natural or supernatural qualities we possess, they are your blessings and they celebrate your bounty, mercy,

and goodness; from you we have received all good things. And if one person receives more and another less, yet all are yours, and without you we cannot have even the smallest of them.

One who has received more should not boast of his own merit nor lift himself above others nor look down on those having less, for he is a greater and better person who attributes less to himself, and he is all the more humble and devout in returning thanks. The person who always views himself humbly is the more fit to receive greater things.

One who has received less ought not to become dejected nor indignant nor envy the someone who has received more. Instead, he should turn to you and greatly praise your goodness, because you bestow your gifts so abundantly, so willingly, so freely, without considering a person's rank or worth. Everything comes from you, and so you must be praised in everything. You know what is best to give to each of us. Why this person has less and that person has more is not our business but yours. You alone know each person's merits.

For that reason, Lord God, I consider it a great blessing not to have many of those things that in other's eyes might appear praiseworthy and wonderful, for anyone who reflects on his own poverty and lowliness may not feel a burden or sadness or dejection in it but a comfort and a great joy. You, O God, have chosen the poor and humble and those who are despised by the world to be your friends and members of your household. Your Apostles, whom you have made princes over all the earth, are themselves witnesses to this. They lived in the world without complaint, so lowly and simple, so without malice or deceit that they were even happy to suffer insults for your name, and with great affection they embraced what most of the world detests.

Nothing, therefore, ought so to delight one who loves you and knows your kindnesses than that your will and your

eternal purposes be accomplished in him. He ought to be as content and happy in being considered the least of all as another is in being thought the greatest. He enjoys as much peace and contentment in the last place as in the first. He is as cheerful being ignored and rejected, devoid of name and reputation, as another is when he is thought to be full of honor and greatness.

Your will and the love of your honor ought to take first place above all else. They should please and comfort a person better than all the blessings which one has or ever will have.

Imitating Christ

1. What role does remembering play in your spiritual journey? Do you ever look back over the day, the week, the year and recount those people and events that have had special significance for you? Do you try to discern the presence of the Lord in such personal encounters and events? What did you discover? How did you discover it?
2. Do you ever think of the blessings you have received from God? Have you ever drawn up a list? What gifts and blessings do you share with others? What gifts and blessings are peculiarly your own? Have you ever thanked God for them?
3. Have you ever been jealous of others on account of their special talents or endowments? Do you think anyone has ever been jealous of you? What are some practical ways of dealing with such jealousy toward others or toward you? Have you ever tried putting them into practice?

Chapter Twenty-Three

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus instructs his disciple in the way of peace. His instruction is short, but of great relevance. True peace lies in seeking to do the will of others rather than one's own, in wanting less rather than more, in always seeking a lower place for oneself, and in seeking always to do the will of God. His disciple recognizes the wisdom of these words, but is deeply conscious of the selfish tendencies within his heart. He asks Jesus to cast all darkness from his heart and to calm the storm of his passions. We must do the same, if we desire genuine, lasting peace. Only the Lord can lead us along the way of discipleship and impart to us the kind of peace that never ends. He alone can help us to live for others without counting the cost.

Of Four Things That Bring Great Peace

Jesus:

My dear friend, now I shall teach you the way of peace and true freedom.

Disciple:

Do as you say, Lord, for this I delight to hear!

Jesus:

Strive, my friend, to do another's will rather than your own; always prefer to have less than more; always seek the lower place and be submissive in all things; always wish and pray that God's will may be entirely fulfilled in you, for you see, the person who does all this enters a place of peace and rest.

Disciple:

Lord, this brief talk of yours is full of perfection. It has few words, but it is rich in meaning and abundant in reward. If I could faithfully keep your words, I should not so easily be upset, for as often as I feel myself uneasy or burdened, I find that I have strayed from this teaching. But you who can accomplish all things and always care for my soul's good, grant me greater grace so that I can put into practice your words and achieve my salvation.

A Prayer Against Evil Thoughts

O Lord, my God, do not be far from me; O my God, hasten to help me, for a multitude of evil thoughts have risen up against me and great fears trouble my soul. How shall I pass through them unharmed? How shall I shatter them?

Jesus:

I shall go before you and bring down the braggarts of the earth. I shall open the prison doors and reveal to you the most hidden secrets.

Disciple:

Lord, do as you say, and let all evil thoughts disappear before your face. This is my hope and my only consolation: to fly to you in every affliction, to confide in you, to call upon you from the depths of my being, and patiently to await

your solace.

A Prayer for the Mind's Enlightenment

Good Jesus, enlighten me with the clear shining of inner light, and expel all darkness from the chambers of my heart. Restrain my many wandering thoughts, and crush the temptations that batter me. Fight strongly for me, and conquer the wicked beasts—I mean those seductive, sensual urgings of mine—so that peace may be gained through your power and so that your praise may resound fully in your holy temple—that is, in a pure conscience.

Command the winds and storms; say to the sea, “Be still,” and to the north wind, “Do not blow,” and there will be a great calm. Send forth your light and your truth that they may shine upon the earth, for until you enlighten me I am an empty and vacant land. Pour forth your grace from above; water my heart with heavenly dew; send down the waters of devotion to irrigate the face of the earth so that it may bear good and perfect fruit. Lift up my mind, oppressed by the weight of sins, and raise my every longing to heavenly heights, so that having tasted the sweetness of a higher happiness I may be ashamed to think of mundane things. Take me away and deliver me from the fleeting comforts of all material things, for no material thing can fully satisfy me, comfort me or console me. Unite me to yourself with an unbreakable bond of love, for you alone can satisfy one who loves you.

Without you everything else is pointless.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you agree with Jesus' advice in the opening part of the chapter about the way to achieve true and lasting peace? Do you agree with all of it? Part of it? None of it? Would you add anything to the list? Would you delete anything?
2. Do you consider yourself capable of putting Jesus' advice into action? Do you find it desirable? What would be the easiest thing to do? What would be the most difficult for you?
3. What practical things do you do to nurture the peace of Jesus in your heart? Are these practices all of your own doing? Does the Lord have any role to play in it? If so, is it a large or small role? Have you ever specifically asked the Lord to guide you along the way of peace?

Chapter Twenty-Four

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus warns his disciple about being overly curious about other people's business. Although we live in community and therefore are responsible for the people we live with, we must be very careful not to intrude into areas where we definitely do not belong. We should pray for the prudence to know when it is appropriate for us to challenge someone about his or her private affairs and when we are overstepping the bounds

of Christian charity. No one likes a busybody. If we are not careful, we will find ourselves in situations where we are simply meddling in other people's lives and not really helping them. Rather than interfering in this way, it would be better if we simply prayed for them. In doing so, we intercede for them with the Lord and help them in ways that we ourselves cannot.

Of Avoiding Curiosity about Other People's Lives

Jesus:

My friend, do not be inquisitive nor burden yourself with useless things. What is this or that affair to you? Your duty is to follow me. What does it matter to you whether this person is so and so or whether that one says such and such? You will not have to answer for others, but you will have to answer for yourself. So, why get involved?

Look, I know everyone, and I see everything that is done under the sun. I know how it is with each and every person—what he thinks, what he wants and what he has set his sights upon. So, everything should be left to me. As for you, keep yourself in good peace, and let the busybody fuss to his heart's content, for whatever he might do or say will return to haunt him. No one can deceive me.

Do not fall all over yourself in an effort to bask in the shadow of famous people nor to have a pack of acquaintances nor to enjoy the personal affection of a few close friends. These things breed distractions and great darkness in the heart. I would willingly speak to you and reveal my most inner thoughts if you would carefully await

my coming and open the door of your heart to me. Be prudent, watch in prayer, and be humble in all things.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you meddle in other people's affairs? Often? Never? Once in a while? Do other people meddle in yours? If so, how does it make you feel? Have you ever talked to them about it? Where does such unrestrained curiosity come from? How can it be dealt with in a reasonable and healthy manner?
2. Do you seek out the company of the rich and powerful? Do you need the affirmation of many acquaintances? Of special friends? Do such relationships help you to deepen your relationship with God or are they distractions that deepen your darkness of heart?
3. Do you keep watch for God in the events of the day? Do you await his coming? Do you look for him? How do you know he has arrived? What signs do you look for? Do you open your heart to him? If so, what secrets does he reveal to you?

Chapter Twenty-Five

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus speaks to his disciple about true peace of heart. Such peace comes by seeking the will of God at all times. We do this by offering our hearts to God

and by seeking to serve him in all that we think, say, and do. We should be concerned first and foremost with our own comportment and be careful not to judge others too quickly. Doing so helps us to keep our focus on doing the Lord's will for us from one moment to the next. When we are truly at peace with ourselves, others, and God, we are able to withstand whatever trials that come our way. Such peace is more than just a matter of feeling. It means trusting in the Lord at all times and being prepared to walk in his footsteps.

Of True Peace of Heart

Jesus:

My dear friend, I have said: "I leave you peace, my peace I give you; the peace that I give is not the peace that the world gives." Everyone wants peace, but not all care for what leads to true peace. My peace is with the humble and gentle of heart; your peace will be in exercising great patience. If you hear me and follow my voice, you will enjoy great peace.

Disciple:

So, what shall I do?

Jesus:

In all things consider well what you do and what you say, and direct everything you hope to do to this end: that you please only me and desire and seek nothing but me. As to what others say or do, pass no flip judgments, and do not entangle yourself in things that do not concern you. Follow

this advice and you will seldom be troubled. Yet, keep in mind that never to feel any disquiet nor to suffer any heartache or physical pain is not the stuff of this present life, but of eternity.

So, do not believe that you have found real peace if you feel no burden nor that all is well if you suffer no opposition. And do not assume everything to be perfect if things seem to be going your way. Neither should you consider yourself something great or especially beloved by God if you happen to enjoy great devotion and tenderness. A true lover of virtue is not known by such things as this nor does your progress and perfection consist of such things.

Disciple:

Of what, then, do they consist, Lord?

Jesus:

They consist of offering yourself with your whole heart to the will of God, in not seeking your own interests in things great or small, in time or eternity, so that with one steady outlook through prosperity and adversity, weighing everything in the same balance, you will continue to be grateful.

If your hope can be so strong and so steadfast that when inner comfort seems to disappear, you can even then prepare your heart for greater onslaughts, then you will find true peace. If you are not so self-righteous as to think that you should not have to suffer hardships, then you will find true joy. And if you thank me just the same both in comfort and in trial, then you will know that I am truly present in your life. When you achieve such a complete disregard for your own self-importance, then you will find as much peace as it is possible to have in this present life.

Imitating Christ

1. What does it mean to offer your heart to the Lord? How do you do it? Does this offering need to be renewed from time to time? If so, how often? Every day? Every week? Every year? What does it mean to for Christ to dwell in your heart?
2. What does the phrase “true peace of heart” mean to you? What are its qualities? What are its effects? Have you ever experienced it? Have you ever had a taste of it? What effect does “a peaceful heart” have on the way you deal with others?
3. Do you know anyone whom you would consider to be an especially peaceful person? What do you think is the source of that peacefulness? How does he or she react to difficult situations and times of trial? How do you react to such situations? What can you do to nurture a more peaceful spirit in your heart?

Chapter Twenty-Six

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple asks the Lord for help in staying free from the cares of the world. This heartfelt prayer petitions God for the grace to live life with moderation and to be free of all anxieties. The disciple recognizes that there is only one thing that matters: to love God with all one's heart. We need to see this as well. The worries of daily life can make this exceedingly

difficult. If we are not careful, we can easily be overwhelmed by the worries of daily life. We need to fix our sights on God and do all in our power to make sure our hearts are in the right place. Prayer is essential in making this happen. If we humbly ask the Lord to preserve us from temporal cares and to use all things with moderation, we will not be disappointed.

That True Freedom Comes More From Humble Prayer Than From Much Reading

Disciple:

Lord, this is the work of a perfect person: never to allow the soul to relax from straining after heavenly things and to pass among the many cares of this world as though they did not exist, not in an apathetic way, but with a freedom that comes from loving you above all else. My most gracious Lord, I implore you to keep me from the cares of this life, lest I find myself entangled in them; from the body's many wants, lest I become enslaved to them; from every obstacle of the soul, lest I break under the anxiety and utterly collapse.

I do not ask that you deliver me from those things which people in their vanity so feverishly chase after. I only ask that you free me from those ills which accompany our mortality and that painfully weigh me down and keep me from experiencing your presence as often as I would like.

O God, my unutterable sweetness, turn into bitterness for me every comfort that draws me from the love of eternal things and wrongly entices me to itself under the guise of some present, delightful good. Do not let it overcome me, O my God; do not let the world with its values deceive me and win

me over. Do not let the devil and his cunning trip me up. Give me strength to resist, patience to suffer and constancy to keep on. Give the anointing of your spirit in place of all worldly rewards, and in place of self-centeredness, fill me with the love of your name.

Look and see how food, drink, clothes and other things needed to support me are burdensome when I burn with love for you. Allow me to use such things sparingly and not to be caught up in wanting them too much. We are not allowed to reject them all, for nature must be sustained, but your holy law forbids us to ask for more than we need and for things that mainly prop up our self-importance. If we do, we feel endless conflict.

In all this I ask that your hand may guide me and lead me that I may never yield to excess.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you worry a lot? Do you consider yourself an anxious person? Do you find it difficult to relax? Can you separate your work from the rest of life? Or do you find yourself trying to do more and more in less and less time?
2. Do you use things with moderation? Are there any areas in your life that fall outside the bounds of moderation? Can you be specific? What concrete steps can you take that would help you to become more balanced in those areas?
3. Do you bring your worries, concerns, and anxieties to God in prayer? Often? Hardly ever? Never? If not, why not? Do you believe that God can help you to become trusting and less anxious?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus speaks to his disciple about the dangers of self-love. The spiritual life involves a movement from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. For most of us, this process of conversion takes an entire lifetime—and even more. Self-love is one of the major effects of original sin. When we are born into this world, we have a radical orientation toward putting ourselves before others. Jesus came into the world to turn this tendency in our natures completely around. His wish for us is that we be totally centered on him so that, like him, we can become totally oriented toward others. Like the disciple, we must ask God for the strength to overcome our selfish orientation.

That Self-love Blocks Us From Attaining the Highest Good

Jesus:

My dear friend, you must give all to get all, and nothing of yourself is to remain. Know that self-love hurts you more than anything else in the world. Everything clings to you more or less according to the love and affection that you have for it. If your love is pure, simple and good, you will not be a slave to anything. Do not lust after things you should not have. Do not possess what will possess you. It surprises me that with all you can wish for and all you can

have, you have not wished for me from the very depths of your heart.

Why do you pine away with empty grief? Why wear yourself out with needless cares? Continue to please me and nothing will harm you. If you seek this thing or that, or if you want to be in this place or that because it will be more profitable or pleasing to you, you will never find peace. In everything you will find something wrong, and everywhere you go, you will find someone you won't like.

Acquiring and storing up possessions is of no help either; rather, being indifferent to them and cutting them from your heart will help the most. This, you understand, applies not only to money and wealth but to the drive for honor and the desire for praise, all of which mean nothing in the end.

Having an important position in your community means nothing either if you lack a loving heart, nor will the peace that you seek last for long if your heart is not rooted in its proper soil. Without me you can change, but you may not be any better for it. When the opportunity for recognition and self-importance arises—and you take it—then you run into what you tried to avoid—and more.

Disciple:

A Prayer for a Clean Heart and Heavenly Wisdom

Strengthen me, O God, by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Make my inner self strong, and empty my heart of all useless anxiety and distress. May I not be drawn away by conflicting desires, be they worthless or prized, but may I consider them all as passing things and I too as passing with them. Nothing under the sun is lasting here where all is vanity and vexation of spirit. Oh, how wise is the

person who thinks this way!

Give me, O Lord, heavenly wisdom that more than anything else I may learn to seek and to find you, to taste and to love you above all things, and to understand all other things as they are, as your wisdom has ordained them to be. Give me discretion to avoid those who puff me up with flattery and the patience to bear with those who work against me. It is great wisdom not to be tossed thither and yon by windy words nor to give ear to the falsely flattering serpent. May we each go confidently along the path he has started!

Imitating Christ

1. How does self-centeredness manifest itself in your life? Are there any areas where it is more present than others? Is it waxing or waning in your life? What practical steps could you take to lessen its influence in your life?
2. What role do prayer and the sacraments play in your journey from self-centeredness to God-centeredness? A big role? No role? Do you see the connection between growth in prayer and growth in the Spirit? Is it possible to become God-centered without a deep personal prayer life?
3. What is the difference between self-centeredness and a genuine love of self? What qualities do you associate with each? What self-image does a self-centered person have? What self-image does a God-centered person have? How does God fit into the picture?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus tells his disciple not to be upset by the disparaging words of others. Silence is often the best response in such situations. Rather than responding in kind, the prudent thing to do would be to hold one's tongue and to suffer in silence. We should not be too anxious to please others or to be thought of highly by them. If we are truly rooted in the Lord, all that we should be concerned about is how we look in his eyes. When we do so, we see how weak and small we really are. Our inner peace should not depend on what others may say of us, but on the Word of God dwelling in our hearts.

Of Those Who Speak against Us

Jesus:

My dear friend, do not take it to heart if some people think ill of you and say things about you that you would rather not hear. You should think worse of yourself and believe that no one is weaker than you are. If you walk by an inner light, you will not think much of words that are hurled at you. It is no little discretion to be silent in bad times, to turn inwardly to me, and not to be upset by what other people think.

Your peace does not depend on what other people say; whether they think well or ill of you, you remain the same person. Where is true peace and true glory? Is it not in me?

The person who has no wish to please others—nor who is afraid to displease them—will enjoy great peace. All unquietness of heart and distracted thought springs from having too great a love for the wrong things—and from needless fear.

Imitating Christ

1. How do you react when you hear others making disparaging remarks about you? Do you get upset? Angry? Depressed? Do you fight back? Do you say things to them in order to get them upset?
2. Is it important that others think highly of you? How would it affect you if it all suddenly changed? Would it disturb your peace of mind? Would it affect your own self-image? How would it affect your relationships with others? With God?
3. Does “courage against detraction” mean always to remain silent and turn the other cheek? Are there any situations where it might be necessary to defend yourself against the criticisms of others and to safeguard your reputation? Have you experienced any such moments in your life?

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple talks about the importance of calling upon the Lord in times of trouble. There are many ways of invoking God’s name. The important thing

is that we do so, especially when we find ourselves in difficult situations. One of the easiest and most popular ways is to address God with a short prayer of petition such as “Lord, help me!” or “Lord, come to my rescue!” In times of difficulty, short prayers such as these are very often all that we can muster. Their shortness, however, says nothing about their sincerity or efficacy. A brief but intense prayer straight from the heart does much more good than longer ones that are lukewarm or lacking in intensity.

Of How We Should Bless God in Times of Trial

Disciple:

Blessed be your name forever, O Lord, for you have willed this trial and temptation to come upon me. I cannot escape it, but must fly to you so that you may help me and turn it to my good.

Lord, I am in great distress even as we speak, and my heart is distraught. My present suffering overwhelms me. And now, my Lord, what am I to say? I am in dire straights. Save me from this hour! Yet, I came to this hour for only one reason: that you might be glorified when I shall have been deeply humbled and set free by you. May it please you, O Lord, to deliver me, poor person that I am, for what can I do and where can I go without you?

Give me patience, Lord, even in this misfortune. Help me, O my God, and I shall not be afraid, no matter how much I may be oppressed. And now, in the midst of these things, what shall I say? Lord, your will be done! I have certainly deserved to be troubled and burdened. I must bear it at all costs, and may it be with patience until the storm passes over and things get better.

Yet, your almighty hand has the power to remove this temptation from me and to lessen its force lest I sink under it, as you have done so often for me in the past, my God, my mercy. The harder it is for me to fight off these temptations, the easier it is for the right hand of the Most High to turn things in the proper direction.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you pray to the Lord in times of need? If so, how

- do you pray? What effect does such prayer have on you? On the way you react to the situation you are in? Do you believe your prayers are heard? Always? Sometimes? Never? What makes you feel that way?
2. Do you ever pray to God in short petitionary prayers? If so, when do you pray them? Do you find them helpful? Does such prayer come easily to you?
 3. Are there any other ways of calling upon the Lord in times of affliction that you have found helpful? If so, how did you discover them? How often do you use them? Have you ever shared those ways with others?

Chapter Thirty

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus tells his disciple of the importance of turning to God in prayer quickly and with confidence. So many of us go to prayer only when all else fails. We use it as a last resort. We exhaust all other means of getting what we want before we finally understand that there is no effective help for us except the Lord. Jesus assures us that he keeps his promises and that nothing is too difficult for him. He asks us to stand firm in our faith and not to be afraid to place our needs before him. It is useless for us to be overly concerned about the future. Instead we should trust in him and believe in his mercy. Jesus is often closest to us when we experience

little spiritual joy in our lives and he seems absent from our hearts and far away from our daily concerns.

Of Asking for God's Help

Jesus:

My dear friend, I am the Lord who gives strength in the day of affliction. Come to me in times of trouble. The main thing that gets in the way of heavenly comfort is that you are slow in turning to prayer. Before you finally settle down for a serious talk with me, you look for all sorts of other comforts and you try to recover your spirits by keeping busy. So, it comes to pass that none of it helps very much until you remember that I am the one who rescues those who trust in me. Outside of me, there is no effective help, no worthwhile advice, no lasting cure.

But now that the storm is over and you have caught your breath, grow strong again in the light of my mercies, for I am close at hand to restore everyone, and to restore them abundantly and beyond measure.

Is anything impossible for me? Shall I be like one who breaks a promise? Where is your faith? Stand firmly and persevere. Be patient and have courage. Comfort will come to you in due time. Wait for me. Wait. I shall come and heal you. It is temptation that vexes you and needless fear that frightens you. What does anxiety about the future bring but sorrow upon sorrow? Today has troubles enough of its own. It is vain and useless to feel either grief or joy about future things that perhaps may never happen.

But it is human to be fooled by such imaginings, and to the extent that one is easily drawn away by the suggestions of the enemy, it is a clear sign that the soul is still weak. The enemy does not care whether it be with true or false things

that he abuses and deceives you, or whether he overcomes you with the love of present things or the fear of future ones.

So, do not let your heart be troubled and do not be afraid. Believe in me and trust in my mercy. When you think yourself far from me, I am often closest to you. When you think that almost everything is lost, then often you are about to gain the greatest reward. All is not lost when things do not turn out the way you planned. You must not judge according to the way you feel now nor get so lost in your troubles that it seems there is no way out. Do not think yourself totally abandoned, though for the time being I have sent you some affliction or taken from you the comfort that you want. This is the road to the kingdom of heaven. Doubtless, it is better for you—and for the rest of my servants—that you be tried by adversities than that you have everything turn out the way you would like.

I know your innermost thoughts, and I know that it is more helpful for your salvation that you should sometimes be left feeling flat and spiritually listless. If you always felt aglow with love and full of joy, you would soon become proud of your good fortune and pleased with yourself, thinking yourself to be something you are not. What I have given I can take away, and I can return it when I please. When I give it, it is still mine; when I take it away, I do not take what is yours, for every good gift and every perfect gift is mine. If I send you affliction or adversity, neither complain nor lose heart. I can quickly lift you up again and turn all your trouble into joy.

In all this, I am just, and I am to be highly commended when I deal with you in such a way. If you understand the truth and face it squarely, you should never feel let down or depressed when things go wrong; rather, you should rejoice and give thanks. Yes, you should even consider it a special joy that in sending you sorrows I do not spare you.

“As the Father has loved me, so I love you,” I said to my

beloved disciples, whom I certainly did not send out to a good time, but to a great battle; not to honors, but to scorn; not to idleness, but to work; not to rest, but to bear much fruit through hardship. O my beloved friend, remember these words!

Imitating Christ

1. Do you turn to God in prayer quickly or as a last resort? Can you discern a pattern in the way you pray? If so, is that pattern characterized by confidence or uncertainty? Fearlessness in what you place before the Lord or timidity?
2. Do you trust in God's mercy? Do you believe that his mercy extends to every part of yourself that you are willing to open up to him? When you look into your heart can you identify any areas that you are still withholding from him? Have you asked the Lord for help in turning them over to him?
3. Do you look upon your hardships as something that may ultimately bring you closer to the Lord? Have you ever experienced any hardships in this way? If so, have you ever shared your experience with another person? Have you ever shared this experience with God?

Chapter Thirty-One

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple speaks of the importance of freeing ourselves from all inappropriate attachments.

To imitate Christ means to make room in our hearts for God alone. If anything else fills that space, then we do not yet belong completely to the Lord. It is difficult “to let go and to let God.” That is why there are so few true contemplatives in the world. Such a person covets nothing but God. Most of us find it too difficult to empty out the space of our hearts for God so that he can fill it with his Spirit. We enjoy our creaturely comforts. We cling to our old ways and are slow to change. We like to focus on externals and rarely examine the motives behind our deeds and the accomplishments of others. God’s grace alone can change us. He alone sees us as we truly are and dreams of what we can become.

Of Setting Aside All Created Things That We May Find the Creator

Disciple:

Lord, I need an even greater grace if I am to progress so far in the spiritual life that neither other people nor any other thing can stand in my way, for as long as anything holds me back I am not free to fly to you. That person wished to fly freely who said: “Who will give me wings like a dove’s that I may fly away and find rest?” Who is more at rest than he whose sight is simple, fixed on God alone? And who is more free than the person who desires nothing but God?

A person should, therefore, soar beyond every created thing, leave his self-importance completely behind, and stand enrapt to see that you, the Creator of all, have no equal in

your creation. And unless one were cut loose from clinging to created things, one could not freely attend to spiritual things. This is why there are so few contemplative men and women today: Very few people know how to let everything they do in this world flow from their love for God.

A great grace is needed for this, which may lift the soul and carry it above itself. Unless a person is lifted up in spirit, is cut loose from worldly values, and is wholly united to God, whatever he knows and whatever he has mean nothing. Anyone who considers anything to be great, except the One, the immeasurable and eternal Good, will always be a small person, tied to the earth. Whatever is not God is nothing by comparison and should be recognized as such. There is a vast difference between the wisdom of an enlightened and devout person and the knowledge of a well-read and accomplished scholar. The learning that flows from divine influence is far more noble than that acquired by a person's study and research.

Many people wish for the contemplative life, but they do not practice those things necessary to attain it. One great obstacle is that they rely on signs and feelings and have little concern about doing away with their own self-centeredness. I do not know what it is or what we think we are doing that we, who claim to be so spiritual, so seldom give any thought to our inner lives. I do not know what spirit leads us to take such great pains and to be so apprehensive about passing and petty things. What a pity that after a brief recollection we rush off without rigorously examining our behavior. We pay no attention to where our affections lie nor do we deplore how impure they all are. It was because we had become corrupt that the great flood followed; therefore, since our hearts are corrupt, it follows that the actions flowing from them should also be corrupt. It shows that we lack inner commitment and vitality. From a pure heart flows a good life.

We ask how much a person has accomplished in life, but we

do not weigh his virtues so earnestly. We ask whether he is strong, rich, handsome, talented, a good writer, a good singer, or a good worker, but few of us ask how poor in spirit, how patient and kind, or how devout and inward he is. Nature looks at a person's outward appearance, but grace looks inside; nature is often mistaken, but grace never is, since it trusts in God.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you have any undue or inappropriate attachments in your life? What are they? How did they become that way? How have you tried to reorient them? Have you placed them before the Lord? Have you placed them in his hands?
2. How much of your heart have you given to Christ? All of it? Most of it? Only some of it? How much of your heart do you want to give to Christ? How much does Christ want from you? What is he asking of you now? Can you be specific?
3. Do you understand the motives behind your actions? Are they pure motives? Are they mixed in any way? Do you look more to externals than to the internal? Do you try to look at life the way God sees it? Do you consider yourself a true contemplative? In part? Not at all? How does God see you?

Chapter Thirty-Two

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus instructs his disciple in the

importance of self-denial. We must leave all in order to find all; we must renounce our desires in order to find rest. If we are slaves of our desires we cannot become free and faithful servants of Christ. The disciple recognizes the value of Jesus' words, but also their great difficulty. Jesus encourages us not to be frightened by the demands of perfection, but to keep our eyes on the things that truly last. The Lord will help us to surrender our lives to him. This transformation will not take place in a day or a month or a year. It usually demands an entire lifetime. It *will* take place, however, if we take his counsel seriously, open our hearts to him, and humbly ask for his help.

Of Growing beyond Self

Jesus:

My friend, you cannot have perfect freedom unless you stop being so self-centered—and unless you stop it once and for all. All those who are so caught up in themselves are chained like slaves; they rush in circles, chase every whim, and always seek the easy path, not the path of Jesus Christ. Nothing that such a person plans or accomplishes will last, for everything that does not come from God will perish. Remember this short and meaningful saying: “Forsake all and you will find all; give up your desires and you will find rest.” Ponder this, and when you have put it into practice you will understand everything.

Disciple:

Lord, this is not one day's work nor is it child's play. This brief saying contains everything a religious person must strive for.

Jesus:

Dear friend, you should not give up nor lose heart when you hear what the way of perfection is; rather, you should be inspired all the more to reach greater heights—or at least to yearn for them. I wish it were so with you and that you had reached that point at which you were no longer enamored of yourself but stood ready to do my will. Then you would greatly please me and your whole life would pass in happiness and peace.

You still have much to give up, and unless you give it all up for me, holding nothing back, you will not get what you ask for. I urge you to buy from me heavenly wisdom, more valuable than the purest gold, that you may be rich in the things that count. Put aside earthly wisdom and the wish to please others and yourself. I have said to strive for those things that few people value rather than those things that they all clamor for.

True heavenly wisdom seems worthless to most, and it is largely ignored, for it does not think highly of itself nor does it seek greatness in this world. Many pay lip service to it, but they do not practice what they preach. Yet, this same heavenly wisdom is the pearl of great price hidden from the crowd.

Imitating Christ

1. Are you a slave of your desires or a servant of Christ? One or the other? A little of both? Which is predominant in your life? Which one is gaining ground? Which would you truly rather be?
2. What role does self-denial have in the quest for

holiness? A great deal or very little? What role does it play in your spiritual life? Do you agree with the disciple's assessment that self-denial is the sum of all of religious perfection?

3. Can denial of self itself be selfish? How does one distinguish between healthy desires and selfish desires? How do you distinguish it in your own life? What practical criteria do you use? Does self-denial play a real role in your life or do you only give lip-service to it?

Chapter Thirty-Three

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus tells his disciple to be wary of changing emotions. Feelings are an important part of our human make-up. They need to be listened to and taken into account. At the same time, they change so easily from one moment to the next that they cannot be the sole gauge for decision-making. The best way to put our emotions in their proper perspective is to understand them. Only when we recognize their transient nature will we be able to focus on that part of us which remains solid and steadfast in our day to day living. To pay small heed to our feelings means not to ignore them, but to recognize them for what they truly are. Only in this way can we make an appropriate assessment of their influence in our

lives and focus our energies on living with singleness of purpose and purity of intention.

Of Our Changing Hearts, and of Focusing Our Sight on God

Jesus:

My friend, do not trust the way you feel at the moment, for your feelings will soon change. All your life you are subject to change, even if you do not want to be. Sometimes you are happy, sometimes you are sad; sometimes you are calm, sometimes restless; now full of devotion, now not; now studious, now lazy; now solemn, now lighthearted.

The person who is wise and well instructed in spiritual things is above these changes, not paying attention to his own feelings or to which way the wind blows. Instead, he directs his full attention toward reaching his desired goal. By focusing his sight on me as he is buffeted to and fro, his feet remain firmly planted. And the more intently he focuses his sight on me, the more steadily he presses on through the changing storm.

But in many people this precise focus is blurred, for they gawk about at any pleasant thing that happens along. Rarely will you find anyone unblemished by mixed feelings. Thus Jesus's countrymen came to Martha and Mary in Bethany, not so much to see Jesus as to see Lazarus. So your focus must be sharp and accurate. It must be directed at me and not be distracted by anything else.

Imitating Christ

1. Are you normally in touch with your feelings? Do you understand them? How much of a role do they play in

your decisions? A proportionate role? How do you know when your feelings have too much of an influence on you? What do you do to offset that influence?

2. Are you a moody person? Do you know your moods? Do you know when you are in a particular mood? Are you able to distance yourself from your moods? Can you get out of your moods? Do you allow your moods to have an undue influence over your actions? Over your relationships with others? Over your relationship with God?
3. Do you think of yourself as someone of single purpose and pure intentions? Do others see you that way? Does God see you that way? Would you like to be that way? What plurality of purposes influences your life? What complexities of intention? Can you think of any ways in which these could be simplified?

Chapter Thirty-Four

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple proclaims his deep love for the Lord. The words, “My God and my all!” flow joyfully from his lips. And so should they from ours. Jesus is the source of all happiness. When he is present in our lives, everything has meaning; when he is absent, confusion reigns. We are called to love the Lord above all

else. Even though the old man still lives in us, Jesus the new man stills the storm of our unruly passions. He offers us hope and newness of life. He comes to us in our time of need and shows us the way we should walk. When our hearts grow cold, he warms us with his Spirit. When we cannot walk, he carries us. Jesus is our one and only hope. With him, all things are possible. Without him, we are nothing.

That the Person Who Loves God Enjoys Him Above All and in All

Disciple:

My God and my all! What more can I want? What greater happiness can I desire? O Words! You are tasty and sweet to those who love you but dry and stale to those who do not. My God and my all! Those words say enough to one who understands, but to one who loves, they are delightful to repeat over and over again.

When you are present, Lord, everything is joyful; when you are missing, everything is dreary. You make the heart calm and full of great peace and gladness. You make us think well of all things and praise you in all things. Nothing can give any lasting pleasure without you, for if anything is to be pleasant and appetizing, your grace must be with it, seasoned with the spice of your wisdom. To the person who delights in you, what will not taste right? And what can give any joy to someone who does not delight in you? Those who love the world apart from you know nothing of your wisdom, and those who love others for their own selfish reasons know even less. Loving the world under such terms smacks of

vanity; selfishly loving others plants a doomed vine.

But those who follow you truly love the world and others through you. They are indeed wise. God tastes sweet to them, and whatever good they find in God's creation, they refer it all back to you. There is a great difference—indeed, a vast difference—between the distinctive character of the Creator and that of what he has created, between the eternal and the passing, between light and enlightenment.

O eternal Light, surpassing all created light, send forth a brilliant flash and let it penetrate the most secret recesses of my heart. Cleanse my spirit and give it joy, enlighten it and bring it to life, so that with all its powers it may cling fast to you in boundless joy.

Oh, when will this blessed and desired hour come when you will fill me with your presence and be all in all to me? As long as this is not given to me, my joy will not be complete. But alas! the old man still lives in me. He is not totally nailed to the cross, not fully dead. He still rages against the spirit; he wages war within me and does not allow the kingdom of my soul to be at rest. But you, who rule the power of the sea and calm the surging waves, arise and help me! Scatter the nations that delight in war! Crush them with your power! I beg you, show your wonderful works, and let your right hand be glorified, for there is no other hope or refuge for me but you, O Lord, my God.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you love God above all else? Is Jesus the one and only joy of your life? Do the words “My God and my all!” flow easily (and often) from your lips? Have you ever been asked such questions before? Have you ever asked yourself such questions?
2. How strong a hold does your old man or old woman

have in your life? How is that hold manifested? Which of your passions seem most unruly? Which are the most tamed or in the process of being tamed?

3. Whom do you know better, the old you or the new? Who has the stronger influence over you? The deeper claim? Who would you like to know better? How are you getting to know yourself? Can you be specific?

Chapter Thirty-Five

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus uses the image of warfare to convey the magnitude of the struggle involved in the spiritual life. If we wish to grow in the Spirit, we must be constantly on guard against whatever increases our self-centeredness. This constant struggle can be won only through prayer, patience, and entrusting our hearts entirely to God. Only in this way will we be able to withstand the trials ahead of us. Only in this way will we be able to find our way through spiritual desolations that lie ahead. The Christian life requires courage and vigilance. If we wish to enter into the peace of the Lord, we must use whatever means we have at our disposal to ward off whatever might distract us from our goal.

That There Is No Freedom from Temptation in This Life

Jesus:

My friend, you are never safe in this life. As long as you live you will always need spiritual weapons. You are in the midst of enemies and are attacked right and left. If you do not use the shield of patience, you will not be unwounded for long. What is more, if you do not fix your heart on me with the sincere intention of bearing all things for my sake, you will not be able to withstand the heat of battle nor will you win the victory palm of the blessed. Therefore, you must go through it all courageously and use a strong hand against the enemy, for the food of angels is given to the victor and much misery to the slacker.

If you seek rest in this life, how do you expect to come to eternal rest? Do not make frequent rest your goal but great patience. Seek true peace not on earth but in heaven, not in people or things but in God alone. You should be willing to endure all things for the love of God. Certainly, you should willingly endure labor and sorrows, temptations, vexations, anxieties, necessities, illnesses, injuries, contradictions, rebukes, humiliations, doubts, chastisements and contempt. These things are all aids to virtue; these test one who has begun to follow Christ; these mold a heavenly crown. I pay an infinite wage for a short time at work, and I offer eternal glory for a moment's anxiety.

Do you think you will always have spiritual comforts whenever you please? My saints did not always have them. They met with many troubles and temptations and frequent disappointments; but they patiently endured in all things and showed greater confidence in God than in themselves, knowing that the suffering of this present life is nothing compared to the glory that is to come. Would you expect to have at once what others have received only after many tears and great effort? Wait for the Lord; be strong and take courage. Do not despair or give up, but be constant in offering both body and soul for the glory of God. I shall

reward you abundantly. I shall be with you in every trial.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you think of the Christian life in terms of struggle? Should you? What struggles do you encounter in your walk with the Lord? Which are the most damaging to you? How do you deal with them?
2. Are you watchful over your relationship with the Lord? Do you look out for possible threats and dangers to it? Do you anticipate how you might act in difficult situations? Are you aware of the kinds of circumstances that you need to be particularly cautious in?
3. What are the most important means that you use to deepen your spiritual life? How do they help you? Are they the same ones listed in the chapter? What list would you draw up? Which elements from this list would you suggest to others?

Chapter Thirty-Six

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus tells his disciple not to take the false criticisms of others too seriously. There are some people who just love to criticize others, and it is very unlikely that we will escape their harsh words. Jesus did not; the Apostle Paul did not; nor will we. Jesus asks us not to be overly concerned with what people say about

us. Only Jesus' opinion of us matters. Once we are convinced of his love for us, the false criticisms of others seem unimportant, and we feel very little need to argue back. While it is true that we will sometimes need to speak up in order to avoid giving scandal to others, we must remember our reasons for doing so. The most important thing for us is to keep our eyes fixed firmly on the Lord.

That You Should Not Worry About What Other People May Say About You

Jesus:

My dear friend, cast your heart firmly on the Lord, and if your conscience confirms your devotion and innocence, you will not be afraid of anything that others may have to say against you. It is good and blessed to put up with such things, and it will not be too difficult for a person of humble heart who has greater trust in God than in himself. Since many people like to gossip, few pay any attention to them. In any case, it is impossible to satisfy everyone.

Although Paul tried to please everyone in the Lord and became all things to all people, yet he did not think very much of other people's opinions. He worked hard for the edification and salvation of others with all the talent and ability in him. But this did not prevent him from sometimes being judged or despised by them. So, he turned it all over to God, who knows all, and he patiently and humbly defended himself against those who spoke unfairly of him or who thought him deceitful or in error or who hurled insults at him. He sometimes did respond more strongly to their

accusations, though, so that those who did not fully understand his actions would not be led astray by them.

Why should you be afraid of what others have to say? Today a person is, and tomorrow he is gone. Love God, and you will not fear others. What can another person's words or shabby treatment do to you? Such people hurt themselves more than they hurt you, and they cannot escape God's judgment, no matter who they are. Keep your eyes fixed on God; do not fight words with words, and if at the moment you seem to be beaten and to suffer an undeserved defeat, do not worry about it, and do not lessen your reward in heaven by losing your temper. Instead, raise your eyes to me in heaven. I can deliver you from every embarrassment and wrong, and I can repay each person according to what he has done.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you tend to argue back when others criticize you wrongly? Does it accomplish anything? Have you ever been silent before such criticisms? Did it accomplish anything? How do you know when to speak up in such situations and when to bear what is said in silence?
2. Have you ever wrongly criticized someone? What were your motives for doing so? Were you aware of it when you were doing so? Did you recognize it only after the fact? Were you sorry for doing so? Did you apologize for doing so? In such moments of weakness, what would be the best way to resume the following of Christ?
3. Are you angry when others wrongly criticize you or make false accusations against you? If so, how do you

deal with your anger? Do you vent it? Keep it inside? Share it with someone else? With the Lord? Does keeping silent increase or abate it?

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus and his disciple resume their discussion about the role of self-denial in the spiritual life. We discover the Lord only through the renunciation of self. This process must go on every hour of every day, in small things and in great. It is something that cannot be done without the help of God's grace. The more we ask for the Lord's help, the more will he give it. The more we let go of ourselves and trust in the Lord's will for us, the freer and happier will we become. Self-surrender is the key to true peace of heart. It lies at the heart of our spiritual life and the freedom that flows from it. Self-denial ultimately leads to the discovery of self. It grants us the possibility for growth in virtue and the gifts of the Spirit.

Of Gaining a Free Heart Through Total Self-surrender

Jesus:

My dear friend, abandon yourself, and you will find me.

Give up your will and every title to yourself, and you will always come out ahead, for greater grace will be yours the moment you turn yourself over to me once and for all.

Disciple:

Lord, how often shall I resign myself, and in what ways am I to abandon myself?

Jesus:

Do so always and at all times, in small things as in great. I make no exceptions, but wish to find you stripped of everything. How else can we belong to each other unless you are stripped of all self-will, both inside and out? The sooner you do this the better, and the more completely and sincerely you do it, the more you will please me and the more you will gain.

There are some who resign themselves, but they attach conditions to it. They do not trust in God completely, so they take pains to provide for themselves just in case.

Some offer everything at first, but later, beaten down by temptations, they go back to their old ways and thus make little progress in virtue. People like these will not gain the true freedom of a pure heart nor the grace of a joyful intimacy with me unless they surrender themselves unconditionally and offer themselves as a sacrifice to me each day. Without this total self-surrender a joyful union between us cannot exist, either now or ever.

I have often said this to you, and now I say it again: Walk away from yourself—let go of yourself—and you will enjoy great inner peace. Give all for all, seek nothing, ask for nothing in return, stand purely and without hesitation with me, and you will have me. You will be free in heart, and no darkness will oppress you. Strive for this, pray for this, long for this: that you may be stripped of all your possessions,

and being destitute, you may follow the destitute Jesus; that you may die to yourself and live eternally with me. Then all of your vain fancies, evil thoughts and useless worries will disappear. Then all fear will vanish, and true love will grow.

Imitating Christ

1. Does Jesus' teaching on self-denial seem too harsh to you? Does denial of self mean that we must let go of the very things that give us a sense of personal identity? Is there a distinction being made in this chapter between the true self and the false self?
2. Would it make sense to talk about the false self as that part of us which is "self-centered" and the true self as that which is "God-centered?" If this is so, would self-denial then be the process whereby a person grows out of self-centeredness and becomes more and more focused on God?
3. Which of the two are you more in touch with: your true self or your false self? Can you always tell the difference between the two? In what way can the denial of self actually be considered an affirmation of self?

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus advises his disciple on the correct ordering of one's life. He says that we should all try to be masters of our actions rather than slaves of them.

To do so, we must contemplate eternity in the present moment. Only then will we be able to view the things of this world from their proper perspective. Just as Moses went into the tabernacle to seek solutions from the Lord for his uncertainties and doubts so must we bring our problems and difficulties to God in prayer. Only when we open our hearts and seek the Lord's assistance in this way will we be able to rise above our limited human perspective and learn how to use the things of this world for the greater glory of God.

Of Controlling Our Behavior, and of Running to God in Time of Danger

Jesus:

My dear friend, you should aim diligently at this: that wherever you are and in whatever you do, you should be inwardly free and master of yourself; all things should be subject to you, not you to them. You should be lord and master of your own actions, not a slave or a hired hand. You are to be a free and true person, going on to the destiny and freedom of the sons and daughters of God. Such people stand above present things and look toward eternal ones. With the left eye they see passing things; with the right they see heavenly things. They are not attracted by the things of this world so that they cling to them, but instead they use them as intended by God, the Supreme Artist, who has left nothing without purpose in his creation.

Likewise, no matter what the occasion or event, do not believe everything you see or hear. Instead, do as Moses did. Quickly go into the Tabernacle to confer with the Lord, and

you will often hear the divine answer that allows you to return informed about many things, present and future. Moses always had recourse to the Tabernacle for solving doubts and questions, and he ran to prayer for help in easing dangers and in dealing with unscrupulous people.

So you, too, should take refuge in the secret chamber of your heart, and there earnestly ask for divine help. We read that Joshua and the sons of Israel were deceived by the Gibeonites because they did not first consult the Lord. They were too quick to believe sweet-sounding words, and they were soon tricked by flattery.

Imitating Christ

1. Are you the master of your actions or a slave to them? Do you live in inner freedom or in inner chains? Are you able to contemplate the eternal in the here and now or do you seek substitutes for the eternal with various consumer goods?
2. Do you seek concrete solutions for your problems from God? If so, how do you do so? How do the solutions come? Are they direct or indirect? Explicit or implicit?
3. Do you try to look at the situations you find yourself in from both the human and the divine perspectives? Are these points of view always in conflict? Has such an approach to life changed your understanding of what really matters?

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus tells his disciple how to avoid anxiety. He tells us to bring our cares to him and to trust that he will eventually settle things in our favor. By trusting him with our lives we have no need to worry about what the next moment will bring. Everything is in the Lord's hands, and all we need to do is to discern and follow his call from one moment to the next. He also warns us against being overly concerned with purely human goals. Our interest in such things normally changes over time and has little effect on our ultimate destiny. It is much better for us to surrender ourselves to God and to entrust our well-being to his providential care.

That a Person Must Not Be Overly Eager in His Affairs

Jesus:

My friend, always bring your concerns to me, and I shall take care of them at the proper time. Wait for me to arrange it, and you will see that everything will work out just fine.

Disciple:

Lord, I shall willingly entrust all things to you, for my thoughts on these matters can be of little avail. I wish that I cared less about what might happen in the future and instead could offer myself to you without hesitation.

Jesus:

It often happens that a person vigorously pursues something

that he wants, but when he gets it, he begins to feel differently about it. A person's likes and dislikes do not always stay the same but drive him instead from one thing to another. It is therefore of great importance to abandon yourself even in the smallest things. True progress consists of redirecting love from yourself to others, and the person who has done so is extremely free and very secure.

But the old enemy, who is against all that is good, never stops tempting. Day and night he lies in wait to ambush some unsuspecting person and hurl him headlong into ruin. "Watch and pray," says the Lord, "that you do not enter into temptation."

Imitating Christ

1. Do you consider yourself an anxious person? Are you always worried about the problems of the next day? Do you find it hard to relax, especially when you have some deadline hanging over you? Do you ever share your anxieties with God?
2. Do your interests change over the course of time? Have they changed very much over the past year? Month? Week? Day? Do you spend your energies on things of lasting value? What constitutes such a thing? How do you know it is lasting?
3. Do you surrender your cares and concerns to God? Do you place them in his hands? Do you express your desires, but ultimately leave your worries in his hands? Do you do this often or hardly ever? If you do this rarely or never, what prevents you from doing so?

Chapter Forty

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple proclaims the greatness of the Lord. He alone is our hope, our glory, our salvation. Without him, we can do nothing good. Without him, we constantly move back rather than make whatever little progress we do from day to day. Because Jesus is everything for us, we should live for him alone. To do otherwise, would be to mistake the glory of God for the vainglory of men. The first is the only genuine glory; the second is a disease that strips us of our true dignity as sons and daughters of God. Nothing compares to the glory of the Lord. His name should be praised, not ours; his works glorified, not ours. If we glory in the name of the Lord, the Lord's joy will glow in our hearts.

That All a Person's Goodness Comes From God, Not From Himself

Disciple:

Lord, what is man that you are mindful of him or the son of man that you visit him? What have we done that you should give us your grace? Lord, how can I complain if you leave me or what can I say if you fail to do what I ask? Surely I may truly think and say this: Lord, without you, I am nothing; I can do nothing; I have nothing of myself that is good. I am flawed in all things, and I always tend to nothing, and unless I am helped and instructed by you in the depths of

my being, I become cool and lax.

But you, Lord, are always the same; into eternity you remain always good, just and holy. You do all things well with justness and holiness, and you manage all things wisely. But I, who am more inclined to go backward than forward, constantly drift from one state to the next, for seven seasons wreak havoc over me. Yet, things get better when you reach out your helping hand. Only you, without help from anyone else, can so assist and strengthen me that I no longer look from one thing to the next, but I turn my heart to you and find rest in you alone.

So, if I knew how to put aside all other comfort, either for the sake of devotion or because I felt compelled to seek you—because there is no one else who can comfort me—then I might rightly hope for your grace and rejoice again in your gift of new spiritual comfort.

I thank you, for all things that go well for me come from you. For my part, I am hollow and worthless, a fickle and weak person. What do I have to boast about, then, or why do I wish to be held in high regard? Surely not for my nothingness? Now there is vanity! Such an inflated sense of self is an evil plague, the apex of pride, because it draws us away from true glory and robs us of heavenly grace. As long as a person is pleased with himself, he is displeasing to you, and as long as he gapes after other people's praise, he is deprived of real virtues.

True glory and holy joy are found in glorifying you and not in boasting of one's self; in rejoicing in your name and not in one's own strength; in not finding pleasure in any created thing except for your sake. Let your name be praised, not mine; let your work be extolled, not mine; let your holy name be blessed, and let no one's praise fall on me. You are my glory and the joy of my heart. In you will I be blessed all the day long. As for myself, I shall boast of nothing but my weakness. Let others seek praise from others; I shall seek

praise from God alone.

When compared to your eternal glory, all human glory, all temporal honor, all worldly eminence are vain and foolish. O my God, Blessed Trinity, my truth and my mercy, to you alone be praise, honor, power, and glory forever and ever.

Imitating Christ

1. What difference does the Lord make in your life? Do you truly believe that you can do nothing good apart from his grace? Do you believe that, without this help, you would be more inclined to fall back than to make forward progress?
2. Are you mindful that the Lord is mindful of you? Sometimes? All of the time? Hardly ever? Would you like to be more mindful of him? What effect would it have on your daily life?
3. Do you glory in the Lord or in yourself? Do you desire his name to be praised or your own? Do you seek genuine glory or vainglory? Is it easy to give yes or no answers to these questions or are your reactions sometimes mixed? If mixed, what steps could you take that would help you to offer your life more completely to God?

Chapter Forty-One

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus tells his disciple not to get discouraged when others receive worldly honors. We

should not be concerned with recognition of this sort. All that matters is that we open our hearts to the Lord and allow him to dwell within us. The only recognition that matters is the Lord's. All else is superfluous and in the long run will count for very little. We must be ready to follow the way of the Lord even to the point of being scorned and laughed at. Just as the Lord was willing to suffer shame and disgrace for the sake of others, so must we be willing to be counted small and insignificant in the eyes of others. Doing so is a sign of how far we are willing to go in our following of the Lord. Once we put our hand to the plow we should not look back.

Of Seeing All Worldly Honor as Nothing

Jesus:

My dear friend, do not become withdrawn if you see others honored and promoted and yourself looked down upon and humiliated. Lift up your heart to me in heaven and you will not feel so bad.

Disciple:

Lord, we are blind and quickly seduced by vanity. If I closely examine myself, I see that no living creature has ever done me an injury for which I could justly complain against you. But since I have often seriously sinned against you, it is only right that all creation should be armed against me. Confusion and contempt are therefore my just deserts, but praise, honor and glory are due to you.

Unless I prepare myself for this and am willing to be scorned

and forsaken by all creation and to be seen as an absolute nobody, I shall never find inner peace and stability nor shall I ever become spiritually enlightened or perfectly at one with you.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you look for recognition from others? Do you live for it? Do you make your decisions according to it? Can you live without it? What kinds of recognition are most important to you?
2. What role does genuine human affirmation play in your life? How does it differ from the inordinate pursuit of worldly honors and advancements? Are the two connected in any way? Should they be separated? If so, how can this be done?
3. Is recognition by the Lord all that matters to you? Do you lift your heart to the Lord when you are humiliated or slighted? Is there a connection between recognition by the Lord and genuine human affirmation? Are they disconnected in any way? Which is more important to you? Which do you spend more time pursuing?

Chapter Forty-Two

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus instructs his disciple in the ways of human friendship. Human friendships are good if they are based on the love of God. If Jesus is present in them, then friends will grow in virtue and be drawn closer both

to God and to each other. If Jesus is absent from them, however, then the relationship will never last. We must be careful not to make our happiness depend on anyone or anything other than God. If our friend becomes more important to us than God, then we make a “god” out of our friend. In such a case, friendship becomes a hidden form of idolatry or love of self. Nor is it very fair to our friend. No one can take the place of God in our lives, not even those we love very much.

That Peace Does Not Depend on Other People

Jesus:

My dear friend, if your peace depends only on a mutual love and friendship with another person, your roots will be tangled and shallow. But if you can turn to the ever-living and deeply rooted truth, you will not be grieved when a friend must leave you or when he dies.

The love of a friend should be rooted in me. No matter how good he appears to be or how much you care for him in this life, he should be loved for my sake. Without me, friendship is neither strong nor lasting, nor is it a true and pure love unless I am the bond.

All human affection and friendship is a reflection of the love that I have for you; you should not want any other kind. True friendship is a gift; it takes root in your own heart, and the more you probe its depths, the higher you ascend to God. Friendship is a grace, and it should be nurtured with humility and love. Be thankful for it, and the Holy Spirit will continue to bless you.

Be careful not to let your friendships stand in the way of

your love for me. It is easy to place your friends first and God second; looking at created things, it is easy to lose sight of the Creator. In your friendships, as in all other things, always place God first, as the source and font of all that is good.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you think that your friendships are rooted in the Lord? If so, how do you know that they are? Are there any concrete signs that you look for? What are they? Could you be mistaken?
2. How is God present in a genuine friendship? Must his presence be consciously perceived by both parties? Do they both need to pray to him? Do they both need to believe in him? Could he be simply a silent onlooker? Could he be present in a variety of ways?
3. Does your friendship with God affect your other friendships? If so, how so? What would those friendships be like if you did not enjoy a close, intimate relationship with God? Do your intimate friendships with others affect your relationship with God? In what way? Can you be specific?

Chapter Forty-Three

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus tells his disciple of the dangers of intellectual learning. Our primary focus in life should be to learn at the feet of our Lord. He is the teacher par

excellence, a master who imparts divine wisdom in his own time and to each as he sees fit. We should not read books simply to appear learned. Appearances easily deceive. We should spend our time instead learning as much as we can about uprooting bad habits from our lives. Jesus alone can teach us this—and so very much more. He imparts to us that inner light which reveals the mysteries of the divine. We can learn more from him in a single sitting than from many years in the finest schools. He explains how he reveals himself to each of us.

Against Arrogant Learning

Jesus:

My friend, do not let fancy words and artful phrases arouse your interest and curiosity. The kingdom of God is not in words but in power. Listen to my words which kindle hearts and enlighten minds and which bring the sting of conscience and lavishly bestow comfort.

Never read anything just to seem more learned or wise; rather, learn to stamp out your vices, for this will serve you better than knowing the answers to a whole list of hard questions. When you have read and learned many things you have always to come back to the one source. It is I who give knowledge, and it is I who give a clearer understanding to those who are gentle and humble than anyone can teach. The person I speak to will quickly become wise and will progress far in the spiritual life.

But woe to those who spend their lives in rooting out esoteric learning, caring little about how to serve me. The time will come when Christ, the Teacher of teachers, the

Lord of angels, will appear to conduct the final exam; that is, to examine each person's conscience. Then he will search Jerusalem with a lamp, and he will bring to light the things hidden in darkness, and all those scholars, so quarrelsome in their learning, will fall silent.

I am he who, in an instant, can raise the humble mind to understand the principles of eternal truth better than anyone who has studied for ten years in graduate school. I teach without the din of words, without the confusion of opinions, without the haughtiness of tenure, without the strife of arguments. I am he who teaches each of you to think little of worldly values, to turn away from popular concerns, to seek everlasting ones, to taste the eternal, to avoid worldly honors, to endure scandal, to put all hope in me, and above all, to love me with a burning, passionate love.

Once there was a person who loved me from the depths of his heart, and he learned divine things, and he spoke of them most wonderfully. He learned more through humility than by studying fine distinctions. To some I speak what is plain to all; to others, what is for them alone. To some I make myself known sweetly in symbol and metaphor; to others, I reveal my mysteries in striking clarity. A book teaches one lesson, but it does not teach everyone equally, for deep within you, I am the Teacher of truth, the Searcher of the heart, the Reader of thoughts, the Mover of deeds, giving understanding to each person as I see fit.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you live in an atmosphere that prizes or is suspicious of intellectual learning? Is it possible for intellectual learning to lead us to God's wisdom? If so, what would be necessary for this to happen? What does the author mean by "arrogant learning?"
2. What is your own attitude toward intellectual learning?

Does it have an important role in your life? Does Christ play any role in it? Does it have anything to do with the difference between learning about God and coming to know God?

3. Do you look upon Jesus as your teacher? If so, what has he taught you? How has he imparted his knowledge to you? Have you been an instrument of imparting that knowledge to others?

Chapter Forty-Four

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus instructs his disciple on the importance of caring only for God. The disciple, in turn, laments humanity's general unwillingness to rise above earthly concerns. When God is at the center of our lives, everything we do is put in perspective. We are not concerned about what others think of us. We leave them to their opinions and avoid heated arguments with them. When we listen to the voice of the Lord, we gradually come to see what our priorities should be in life. God, in turn, extends a helping hand to us and enables us to rise above the cares and concerns of daily life. Such help does not mean that we ignore our responsibilities or think less of them. It means only that we recognize them for what they are and allow God to take center stage in our lives.

Of Minding Our Own Business

Jesus:

My friend, there are many things in life that you must simply pass by. If you wish to grow in your spiritual life, you must not allow yourself to be caught up in the workings of the world; you must find time alone, away from noise and confusion, away from the allure of power and wealth. You must also turn a deaf ear to many things, and think instead on those things that contribute to your peace. It is better to avert your eyes from what distracts you from your purpose. Quietly leave each person to his own opinion, and avoid contentious bickering. If you stand in good stead with God and respect his ways, you will more easily be able to do this.

Disciple:

O Lord, what have we come to? Just look! We cry a sea of tears over a trivial loss; for a petty gain we scurry about and work our fingers to the bone, and the damage to our soul is soon forgotten—indeed, it is rarely even thought of! We dwell on unimportant things, and we carelessly skip over the most important thing of all. A person's entire being slips into the quicksand of the world, and unless he hoists himself out—and quickly, too—he soon finds himself settled firmly in the mire.

Imitating Christ

1. What does the author mean when he advises his readers “not to be caught up in the workings of the world?” Does it mean that you must turn your energies away from your legitimate responsibilities? Reduce your worry and anxiety over them? Place them in the hands of the Lord?

2. Do you think most people find it difficult to keep things in perspective? Do you think they find it hard to distinguish what really matters from what is merely of secondary importance? Are you that way?
3. What is your primary concern in life? Do you spend most of your time concentrating on that concern? How is that concern related to the other things that you do? Does that concern have anything to do with God? How would you describe the connection?

Chapter Forty-Five

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple speaks of the importance of placing our trust in God. He alone is our hope and salvation. In him alone can we place our complete and utter confidence. If we do so with others, we will often find ourselves being let down. We are so weak and inconstant. We let others down even when we do not wish to do so. If someone confides in us, we can easily betray him or her without even knowing it. The same can also happen to us. It is difficult to find someone who will stand by us even in the most difficult circumstances. Such a friend will do so only if he or she is a close friend of God. We know that we can depend on God. To do so, we must open our hearts to him and allow him to speak to us.

That We Should Not Believe Everything We Hear and of How Easy It Is to Speak Ill of Others

Disciple:

Send me your help, Lord, in time of trouble, for help other than yours is no help at all. How often has loyalty turned up missing where I was certain I would find it, and how often have I found it where I least expected it! Looking to others for salvation is foolish; the salvation of the just is in you, O God.

May you be blessed, O Lord, my God, in everything that happens to us. We are weak and unstable, and we quickly make mistakes and change our course. Is there anyone who can behave so carefully and meticulously in everything he does that he never makes mistakes or encounters doubts? But the person who trusts in you, Lord, and who seeks you with a simple heart, does not fall so easily. And if by chance such a person should fall into some trouble—no matter how entangled in it he may become—he will soon be snatched from it or be comforted by you, for right up to the end you will not abandon a person who trusts in you.

It is rare to find a loyal friend who stands by a companion in all his troubles. You, Lord, you alone are most faithful in all things. No one else is like you. Oh, how wise was that holy soul who said: “My mind is firmly set and grounded in Christ.” If it were that way with me, human fear would not so easily upset me nor would barbed words provoke me. Who can foresee everything, or who can guard against misfortunes that lie ahead? If the things we expect often hurt us, imagine what those we do not expect can do! Why did I not provide better for myself? And why did I rely so heavily on others? We are only human, after all; we are nothing but frail men and women, even though many think of us as

angels and even call us angels!

In whom shall I trust, Lord? In whom but you? You are the Truth who can neither deceive nor be deceived. And in just the opposite way, all of us are prone to falsehood, to being weak, unstable and fickle, especially in what we say. Often we cannot even believe what seems to sound right on the surface, at least not at first. How wisely did you warn us to be careful of what others say, and that a person's enemies are often those of his own household. Even if someone close to us should say, "Look, the Lord is here!" or "Look, the Lord is there!" we should not necessarily believe him.

I have learned my lesson at great expense; may it serve to make me more cautious and not to increase my foolishness. "Be wary," a certain person once said to me, "Be wary. Keep what I say to yourself." And while I am silent and believe the matter to be secret, he himself cannot keep the secret he asked me to keep, but soon he betrays both me and himself, and then he goes on his way! Lord, protect me from all such gossip and from careless people, for I do not want to fall into their hands nor do I want to do as they do. Let me speak only true and honest words; keep me far from crafty rhetoric. What I do not wish to suffer from others, I should certainly avoid doing myself!

Oh, how good and how peaceful it is to keep silent about others and not to believe gossip or spread it around. How good it is to confide in only a few people and to seek you always, the one who probes my heart. How fair it is not to be blown about by the blustery wind of gossip, but to wish that all things, both inside us and out, may be done as you wish. How sure it is for preserving heavenly grace to escape from public show, to avoid causing admiration in others, and to untiringly pursue all those things which better our lives and increase our devotion. How many have been harmed by having their virtue recognized and praised too soon. Indeed, how grace has gained when it was kept hidden during this fragile life, a life which is one test and conflict after another.

Imitating Christ

1. Have you ever been let down by another person? If so, what were the circumstances? How did you feel? Did you learn from the situation? Did you hold a grudge against that person? For how long? Were you able to forgive that person?
2. Have you ever let another person down? If so, in what way? Do you remember the specifics of the situation? Did you learn anything about yourself as a result of it? Did you apologize to the person?
3. Have you ever felt let down by God? If so, what were the particulars of the situation? Do you think you were let down by God or by your image of God? What does it mean to trust God in all things? To do so, is it necessary to let go even of our images of him?

Chapter Forty-Six

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus tells his disciple to put up with injuries inflicted by others. If we are truly rooted in the Lord, there should be no need for us to defend ourselves against others. If the desire to do so grows strong in us, it is only a sign that we still value what other people think of us. It is true that we must avoid giving scandal and that sometimes it is necessary to defend our reputation on these grounds. It is also true that we must come to the

defense of the weak and powerless in times of need. For the most part, however, we should not be bothered by the harsh words that others send our way. If we truly trust in the Lord, we should be able to let go of our desire to defend ourselves and to equal the score. God knows everyone's hidden motives and will one day reckon the score on all counts.

Of Having Confidence in God when Sharp Words Attack Us

Jesus:

My dear friend, stand firmly and trust in me, for what are words but words? They fly through the air, but they hurt nothing. If you are at fault, think that you will quickly correct yourself; if your conscience is clear, think that you will freely put up with criticism for God's sake. It is a small enough thing that now and again you must listen to harsh words when you cannot yet endure harsh blows!

And why do such little things go right to your heart, unless you are still rooted in the world and pay more attention to others' opinions than you should? Because you are afraid of being disliked, you are not willing to be criticized for your faults, and so you hide in excuses. But take a good look at yourself, and you will find that you are still full of the world's values and have an empty fondness for pleasing other people. When you refuse to be brought down a few pegs and are upset by your failings, it is as plain as can be that you are not truly humble, that the world is still too much with you. Pay attention to my word and you will not care about ten thousand words that come from others.

Look, if all the things were said against you that the most malicious minds could invent, what harm would it do you if you just let it all pass and considered it to be worth no more than a piece of straw? Could they even so much as pluck one hair from your head? But the person who does not keep his heart within nor God before his eyes is easily annoyed by criticism. The person who trusts in me, though, and who wishes not to stand by his own judgment fears no one, for I am the judge and the knower of all secrets; I understand what happened as it happened; I know the one who inflicts the injury and the one who suffers it. The particular thing said went out through me; it happened by my permission, so that the thoughts of many hearts might be made known. I shall judge the guilty and the innocent, but I wish to try them first in a trial known only to me.

Human evidence often misleads; my judgment is true. It will stand and not be overturned. For the most part it lies hidden and is made known only to a few, yet it is never wrong nor can it ever be wrong, even if it may not seem right in the eyes of some people. Thus, you must run to me in every decision and not depend upon your own judgment. The just person will not be troubled by anything that comes from God. If any unjust charge is spoken against him, he will not much care, neither will he foolishly jump for joy if others find good reason to relieve him of blame. The just person considers that I search the heart and feelings, that I do not judge according to the face of things and how they seem. Often what is full of blame in my eyes is full of praise in yours.

Disciple:

O Lord God, just Judge, strong and patient, who knows the weakness and perversity in others, be my strength and all my confidence, for my own conscience is not enough for me. You know that which I do not know, and so each time that I am criticized I ought to humble myself and bear it meekly.

In your mercy, pardon me when I have not done so, and in the future give me grace to endure still more. In obtaining pardon, your abundant mercy is better for me than a self-defense built on my own idea of what I think is right. Although I am not conscious of anything that I have done wrong, yet I cannot justify myself by this, for with your mercy taken away, no living person will be justified in your sight.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you desire to be thought well of by others? How important is that desire to you? Is it more important to you than your relationship to God? Would you be willing to let go of it for the sake of Christ?
2. Do you agree with the author that one should always try to put up with the injuries inflicted on you by others? Are there any situations where it would be necessary to speak up? Can you be specific?
3. What is your natural reaction when others harm you? To fight back? To flee? To remain silent? To pray for them? What would Jesus' reaction be? Is there a distance between your natural reaction to such situations and what Jesus' reaction would be? If so, how can you lessen the distance?

Chapter Forty-Seven

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus instructs his disciple to suffer the trials of the present for the sake of the eternal. Life is

fleeting. It passes quickly, like the sands through the hour glass. Before we know it, most of our days will be behind us, and eternity alone will stretch before us. We must prepare ourselves for our ultimate destiny. No one will do so for us. If we do not ponder the eternal questions now, what makes us think we will do so at the hour of our death—or even beyond our death? The Lord encourages us to keep our eyes fixed on what really matters. In doing so, the sufferings of the present moment are seen in an entirely different light.

That All Burdens Are to Be Endured for the Sake of Eternal Life

Jesus:

My friend, do not be ground down by the work you have undertaken for me nor let troubles dishearten you; instead, always let my promise strengthen and console you. I am enough to repay you beyond all limit and measure. You will not labor here for long, nor will you always be burdened with sorrows. Wait a little and you will see a quick end to all your trials. The hour will come when blood, sweat and tears will be no more. All that passes away with time is of little importance, and it passes away quickly.

Whatever you do, do it well; work faithfully in my vineyard, and I shall be your reward. Write, read, sing, mourn, keep silent, pray, bear adversity with courage. Eternal life is worth all these battles—and more. Peace will come on a day that is known only to the Lord, and it will not be a day or night such as we know now, but it will be everlasting light, infinite brightness, steadfast peace, and secure rest. Then you will

not say: “Who will deliver me from the body of this death?” Nor will you cry out: “Woe is me that I live so long,” for death will be overthrown, and health will be unfailing. At that time, there will be no more anxiety, only blessed joy and sweet and pleasant fellowship.

Oh, if only you could see the everlasting crowns of the saints in heaven and how much glory they now enjoy— those same saints who, when they were alive, were held in utter contempt by the world and were thought unworthy of even drawing breath. Doubtless you would at once humble yourself to the very dust and would seek rather to be everyone’s servant than anyone’s master. You would not long for the joyful days of this life, but would rather rejoice in bearing any hardship for God’s sake and count it the greatest gain to be thought of as a humble servant to all.

Oh, if you found relish in these thoughts and allowed them to penetrate deep into your heart, how would you dare to complain even once! Are not all painful labors to be endured for eternal life? It is no small thing to lose or gain the kingdom of God! So, lift your face to heaven. Look at me and all my saints with me, they who in this world have had great contention. They are now joyful, they are now consoled, they are now safe, they are now at rest, and they will forever remain with me in my Father’s kingdom.

Imitating Christ

1. What is your sense of the passing of time? Have you ever thought of your life as a single moment in time? Have you ever measured it against the eternal? Does it bother you that it seems so short?
2. What is your attitude toward the burdens of your daily life? Are they simply something to put up with? Are they inescapable? Would you rather they were not

- there? Do they have any eternal significance in them?
3. Does your relationship with God help you through life? Does it enable you to bear the burdens you have been asked to carry? If so, in what way? Does it help you to ponder your destiny? Does it help you to draw a connection between eternal life and the present moment?

Chapter Forty-Eight

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple compares the joys of the world to come with the trials of the present day. We are pilgrims in a foreign land. If we wish to survive, we must keep our sights on our journey's end. Otherwise we will be easily overcome by the distractions that come our way. As wayfarers in this world, we must beseech the Lord to guide us each step of the way. If we are not careful, we will mistake created goods for the goods of heaven. If we are not watchful of the direction in which we walk, we may wind up following the voice of the evil one. To avoid such dangers we must invoke the Lord's name and ask for his protection. With him at our side, we will be able to endure the miseries of the present world and keep our hearts firmly fixed on the joys of heaven.

Of Life and of Eternity

Disciple:

O most blessed mansion of the supreme city! O most bright day of eternity, which is never hidden by night but is always shot through with the light of the highest truth! O day always happy, always secure and never changing into night! Oh, that this day would dawn and all these passing things would come to an end! That day, indeed, shines upon the saints with resplendent and everlasting brightness. But to us who are still on our earthly pilgrimage, it is seen only from afar and as through a glass, darkly. The citizens of heaven know how joyful that day is, but we poor banished children of Eve mourn that this day is bitter and wearisome.

The days of this life are short and evil, full of sorrow and misery, where a person is stained with many sins, ensnared by many passions, bound by many fears, swollen by many cares, distracted by many curiosities, entangled by many vanities, surrounded by many mistakes, weakened by many efforts, weighed down by temptations, sapped by pleasures, tormented by want.

Oh, when will there be an end to all these things that have gone awry in God's plan? When shall I be freed from the wretched slavery of my sins? When shall I be mindful, Lord, of you alone? When shall I fully rejoice in you? When shall I be truly free, without anything standing in my way, with no inner confusion and conflict? When shall I find a solid peace—peace calm and secure, peace inside and out, peace firm in every way? O good Jesus, when shall I see you face to face? When shall I contemplate the glory of your kingdom? When will you be all in all to me? Oh, when shall I be with you in your kingdom, which you have prepared for your beloved from all eternity?

I am left poor and adrift in a hostile land where each day there are wars and great misfortunes. Console me in my exile. Relieve me in my sorrow, for my every desire longs after you. All that this world offers me for comfort is a

burden. I long to embrace you in the very depths of my being, but I cannot take hold of you. I wish to cling to heavenly things, but the things of this world and my undisciplined passions drag me down. In my mind I wish to rise above all things, but against my will I subject myself to them. So, unhappy person that I am, I struggle with myself and become a burden to myself, because the spirit soars upward but the rest of me gravitates downward.

Oh, how I suffer inside! While my mind thinks of heavenly things, a disorderly mob of carnal thoughts confronts my prayers. O my God, do not be far from me. In your wrath, do not turn away from your servant. Flash your lightening and you will scatter them; shoot your arrows and confound all these phantoms of the enemy. Call my thoughts back to you. Make me forget everything that is not you. Help me to fling away the evil phantoms. Help me to despise them. Come to my aid, eternal Truth, so that no vanity may entice me. Come, heavenly sweetness, and let every impurity flee before your face.

Pardon me, too, and mercifully forgive me for the times that I think of things other than you during my prayers. Truly, I confess that I have been in the habit of allowing my mind to wander. Many times my mind is not where my body is, but it is where my thoughts have carried me. I am there where my thoughts are, and my thoughts are usually there with the things I care about the most. That thing which most quickly enters my thoughts is that which naturally pleases me or that which has become pleasing to me through habit; whence you, the Truth, have clearly said: "Where your treasure is, there also will be your heart."

If I love heaven, I gladly think of heavenly things. If I love the world instead of you, I put you out of my mind and rejoice in the world's happiness and become sad in its troubles. If I love the body, my imagination often dwells on it. If I love the spirit, I delight to think of spiritual things. Whatever it is that I love, I eagerly talk about and hear

about, and I bring mental images of it home to myself.

But blessed is that person, Lord, who looks to you alone, who struggles against his twisted nature, and through intense spiritual desire nails to the tree all of the uncontrolled thoughts and desires that run through his mind. Then, with a serene conscience he may offer you unspotted prayer. Then, having shut himself off from all distractions, both inside and out, he may become worthy to be counted among the angelic choir.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you think of your life in terms of a journey? If so, where are you going? Have you done much wandering? Where has it brought you? What have you learned? Is there anything you would do over again? Are there any steps you wish you could take back?
2. Are the miseries of the world as bad as the author makes them out to be? Are they redemptive in any way? Have they taught you anything? Do they change complexion when they are oriented to God? If so, in what ways?
3. Have you thought much about the joys of heaven? If so, in what do they consist? Have you ever had a foretaste of these joys? Have you had it often or hardly ever? If so, what was it like? Are the joys of the present world in any way related to the joys of heaven?

Chapter Forty-Nine

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus instructs his disciple about the nature of holy longing. The desire for heaven is a gift from God. We should give thanks to the Lord when it comes and ask him to deepen its hold on us. Our desires are often mixed. We long for God, but we also long for many other things. Conversion is the process whereby our desire for God grows in our hearts and begins to affect everything else that we do. When trials come, our holy longing enables us to look beyond them and bear them with patience. The benefits of this holy longing are too numerous to count. The divine generosity provides for us and guides us safely to our journey's end.

Of Longing for Eternal Life and of the Promise It Holds

Jesus:

Dear friend, when you feel the desire for eternal happiness poured into you from above and when you long to leave your body behind in order to gaze upon my unchanging and never-shadowed brightness, open your heart wide and receive this holy inspiration with deep longing. Offer the greatest thanks to the divine goodness which deals so graciously with you, which visits you with mercy, which encourages you so warmly, and which powerfully lifts you up. Without it, your own weight will drag you down, for it is not by your own thought or effort that you receive this gift, but only by the favor of heaven's grace and of God's love for you. You receive it so that you may grow in virtue and humility, so that you may ready yourself for the coming

struggles, and so that you may cling to me with all your heart and serve me with a burning desire.

My friend, the fire often burns, but the flame does not ascend without smoke. So, too, some people have a burning desire for heavenly things, but they are not yet free from feelings rooted deeply in the dark recesses of their own hearts. Thus, what they so earnestly ask of God, they ask not solely to honor him but to satisfy themselves, as well. This is frequently the case with you, too, though you may insist that it is not. Nothing is pure and perfect which is tainted by self-interest. Do not ask what is pleasing and of benefit to you but what is acceptable to me and what honors me. If you view things properly, you ought to prefer following my desires rather than your own.

I know what you want, and I have heard your frequent sighs. You wish to share in the glorious freedom of God's children now. You would be delighted to be already in the eternal home and heavenly country, filled with joy. But that hour has not yet come, for there is still another time, a time of struggle, a time of toil and testing.

You wish to be filled with the supreme good, but you cannot attain to it right now. I am that supreme good. Wait for me, says the Lord, until the kingdom of God comes. You still have to be tested and tried out in many things. Comfort will sometimes be given to you, but not fully. Take courage, then, and be strong in doing and enduring the things that go against your natural feelings. You must become a new person, changed into someone else. You must often do what you do not want to do, and what you want to do you must sometimes set aside. What pleases others will succeed; what pleases you will not. What others say will be heard; what you say will not. Others will ask and receive; you will ask and receive nothing. Others will be praised; you will be ignored. Others will be entrusted with this or that responsibility; you will be thought useless.

Sometimes all this will naturally upset you, but it will be to your great advantage if you put up with it in silence. In these and in many similar things the faithful servant of the Lord is tried. Often the most difficult trials involve enduring things that go against your will, especially when what you are asked to do seems stupid and pointless. And since, as a monk, you are under obedience and must not resist a higher authority, it seems hard to you to walk at another's beck and call and to forget your own ideas. But think of the fruit of your labors, of how quickly they will end, and of the great reward that will accompany them. Then you will have no complaints; then you will have only the strongest comfort for your patience.

In trade for that small measure of will that you freely give up now, things will always go your way in heaven. There you shall find all that you wish, all that you can desire. There you will enjoy having every good without the fear of losing it. There your will, at one with mine, will never desire anything extraneous or anything that is not me. There no one will work against you or complain about you, no one will get in your way, nothing will block your path. Instead, every good that you desire will be before you at the same time, all replenishing your love, all filled to overflowing. There I shall give you glory for the insults you have suffered, a robe of praise for your sorrow, a royal seat forever for your present humble position. There the fruit of obedience will be made known. There the work of penance will be turned to joy. And there humble obedience will be gloriously crowned.

Since this is the case, bow yourself humbly under the hands of all. Do not care who said what or who is ordering you about. Pay most attention to this: Whether a superior, a junior, or an equal asks anything of you, take it all in good stride and do your best to do as he wishes. Let one seek this and another that. Let one seek glory in this and another in that and be praised thousands upon thousands of times. As

for you, have none of it. Rejoice only in deep humility and in pleasing and honoring only me. Let this be your wish: whether through life or through death, that God may always be glorified in you

Imitating Christ

1. What do you desire most in life? What do you long for? Would you describe it as a holy longing?
2. How is God involved in your longing? Is he the cause of it? The content of it? The goal of it? Is he longing with you? Does God long for you as much you long for him? Perhaps more?
3. Do you believe in eternal life? Has your idea of it changed over the years? What effect does this belief have on the way you live your life? What does it hold for you? What does it promise you? How does it challenge you?

Chapter Fifty

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple opens his heart to Jesus in the midst of loneliness and afflictions. We should not be afraid to share our deepest thoughts and feelings with the Lord. Even though he already knows what is in our hearts, nothing can replace our free decision to share the personal details of our lives with him. When we do so, Jesus takes what we share with him and holds it close to his heart. We are all called to entrust our lives to the

Lord. Whatever it is that may be troubling us, we should never feel that Jesus would not be interested. Only by confiding in God can we come to a deep, intimate relationship with him. The more we confide in him, the more we are willing to entrust him with even the smallest details of our lives.

How a Lonely Person Should Place Himself in God's Hands

Disciple:

Lord God, holy Father, may you be blessed both now and forever, for as you will things to be, so they are, and what you do is always good. Let your servant find joy in you and not in himself or in anyone else, for you alone are true joy. You are my hope and my reward. You are my joy and my honor, O Lord. What does your servant have except what he has received from you—and without deserving it on his part? What you have given and what you have made are all yours. I am poor and have struggled amidst hardship since my youth, and my soul is saddened at times even to the point of tears whenever it is troubled by passions bent on enveloping her.

I long for the joy of peace. I beg for the peace of your children whom you nurture by the light of your comfort. If you give peace, if you flood me with holy joy, the soul of your servant will be filled with music and will be devout in your praise. But if you take yourself away, as you often do, he will not be able to follow your commandments. Instead, he will fall on his knees and strike his breast, because today is not like yesterday when your lamp shone over his head, and in the shadow of your wings he was protected from

temptation's assault.

O just and ever-praiseworthy Father, the hour has come for your servant to be tested. Beloved Father, it is fitting that at this hour your servant should suffer something for you. O Father, ever-worshipped, the hour has come, which from all eternity you knew would arrive, when for a short time your servant would break down and be overwhelmed, though in his heart he would be with you through it all. For a little while he will be ridiculed, humiliated and brought to nothing in the eyes of other people; he will be crushed with sufferings and weariness. All this will happen so that he may arise with you again in the dawn of a new day and be glorified in heaven.

O holy Father, you have declared it to be so. Such is your will. And since you have ordained it this way, it has come to pass. This is a grace to your friend that he should suffer and be afflicted in this world for love of you, no matter how often, by what means or from what person it comes. Nothing on earth happens without your allowing it to happen and without your knowing about it beforehand.

It is good for me, Lord, that you have humbled me so that I may learn how you think and so that I may toss aside all pride and presumption. It is for my own good that shame has covered my face, that I may look to you for comfort rather than to others. I have learned also from this to hold in reverence your mysterious judgments which affect both the good with the bad, but not without equity and justice. I thank you for having not over-looked my failings but for having worn me down with blows of anguish and distress, for inflicting sorrows and limitations from without and within. Of all things under heaven there is none that can comfort me but you, Lord, my God, heavenly physician of souls, you who wound and heal, who drag down to the depths and lead back up again.

Your discipline is upon me and your rod itself shall teach

me. See, beloved Father, I am in your hands. I bend myself under your correcting rod. Strike my back and my neck that I may bend my crooked ways to your will. Make me a holy and humble disciple as you have so kindly done for others, so that I may always walk according to your least desire. I entrust myself and all that is mine to your correction. It is better to be rebuked here than in the life to come.

You know each and every thing; nothing in our consciences lies hidden from you. You know the future before it happens, and you do not need us to remind you of what is happening on earth. You know what I need for my spiritual progress. You know how much tribulation helps to scour away the rust of sin. Do with me as you wish, and do not turn your back on my sinful life. You know me better and more clearly than anyone else. Grant me, Lord, to know what I ought to know, to love what I ought to love, to praise what is most pleasing to you, to esteem what seems most precious to you, to detest what is loathsome in your eyes. Let me not judge according to outward appearances nor condemn according to what people hear, but with true judgment let me discern between material and spiritual matters, and above all let me always seek to know your will.

Our senses often mislead our judgments, and those who love only this world are likewise deceived in loving only the things they see. Is a person any better because others think him so? A deceitful person deceives the deceiver, the vain person the vain, the blind person the blind, the weak person the weak. Truly, the more such people flatter each other, the more they deceive each other. As the humble Saint Francis says, “A person is only as great as he is in your eyes—and no more.”

Imitating Christ

1. Do you share your troubles with the Lord? Do you lay them out before him? Do you share your anxieties and

feelings of loneliness with him? Do you find it easy or difficult to do this? Does it help you in any way?

2. Do you hold anything back from the Lord? Is there anything you are trying to hide from him? Is there anything you are afraid to tell him? Do you have any idea why this might be so? Are you afraid to trust in his mercy and love?
3. Have you ever felt as though the Lord was confiding in you in a special way? If so, what was the experience like? Did it happen often? Hardly ever? Not at all? Do you find it hard to believe that God would confide his secrets to you?

Chapter Fifty-One

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus tells his disciples about the limitations of contemplative prayer in the present life. Because of the way we are made, it is difficult for us to spend long periods of time focusing on the things of heaven. Our bodily weakness weighs us down and prevents us from staying long on the peaks of prayer. When such periods of tediousness and heaviness of heart come, we must occupy ourselves with doing good during the ordinary tasks of life. These tasks will refresh our souls and prepare us for further encounters with the Lord.

That We Must Perform Humble Works When We Are Unable to Perform Higher Ones

Jesus:

My dear friend, your desire for virtue cannot always remain at a fever pitch nor will you always hold steady in a lofty flight of contemplation. Because of original sin's corruption, you will sometimes descend to lesser things and bear the burden of a decaying life, even though it will be against your will and may weary you. As long as you wander about the world in this mortal body you will know weariness and a heavy heart. Therefore, while you are in the flesh you ought often to bemoan the burden of it, for because of it you cannot fully devote yourself to the spiritual life and to divine contemplation.

When this happens, it is good for you to take refuge in humble, outward tasks and to refresh yourself in good works. Await my coming and my heavenly visit with calm assurance and patiently bear your exile and mental dryness until I come to you and free you from all your worries. I shall cause you to forget your troubles and to enjoy inner peace. I shall spread open before you the pleasant fields of Holy Scripture, so that with open heart you may begin to run in the way of my commandments. And then you will say: "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the future glory that is to be revealed in us."

Imitating Christ

1. Are you able to spend long periods of time at prayer? Do you get tired easily? Distracted easily? Do you find it hard to concentrate? How do you know when it is time to turn to something else?

2. Do you see a connection between the time you spend at prayer and the rest of your daily life? Does your prayer help you with the performance of your daily activities? Do your daily activities in any way help your life of prayer? If so, how so?
3. What specific physical tasks or labors refresh you and prepare you for prayer? Can you be specific? Do they only prepare you for prayer? Are they themselves in some way oriented toward or understood as prayer?

Chapter Fifty-Two

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple speaks of his unworthiness to receive spiritual comfort from the Lord. This feeling comes from a deep sense of one's own sinfulness. The closer we get to God to more we are in touch with our weaknesses and failings. We come to see that nothing we do or say can earn us the right to stand in God's presence. Only God's mercy permits us to approach him and gaze upon his face. God extends his mercy, however, only toward those who recognize their sins and turn to him with a humble and contrite heart. Even that we cannot do without his help. God's grace alone enables us to greet him with a holy embrace.

That We Should Not Think Ourselves

Worthy of Comfort but Deserving of Correction

Disciple:

Lord, I am not worthy of your comfort nor am I worthy of your company. When you leave me poor and desolate you only treat me as I deserve. Even if I were to shed a sea of tears I would still be unworthy of your consolation. I deserve nothing but to be scourged and punished, for I have often gravely offended you, and in many things I have fallen far short of what you expect. Therefore, according to right reason, I do not deserve even the least of your consolations.

But you, O clement and merciful God, do not want to see your works perish. And in order to show the riches of your goodness toward the vessels of your mercy, you stoop to console your servant. Such comfort is immeasurable and is beyond anything I deserve. Your consolation is so unlike even the most pleasant human conversation! What have I done, Lord, that you should console me from heaven? I recall nothing good that I have done, but I do recall always running headlong into vice and being reluctant to change my ways. It is true, and I cannot deny it. If I were to say otherwise, you would give me the lie and no one would stand up for me. What have I deserved for my sins but hell and eternal fire? In truth, I admit that I deserve all scorn and contempt, and I am not fit to be counted among those who are devoted to you. And though I hear this reluctantly, yet, for truth's sake, I admit my sins so that I may more readily deserve to beg your mercy.

What shall I say, guilty and full of confusion as I am? My mouth can utter nothing but this: "I have sinned, O Lord, I have sinned. Have mercy on me and pardon me." Give me a short time that I may mourn my sorrow before I go to a land that is dark and blanketed with the mist of death. What do

you most require of a guilty and wretched sinner but that he should be disgusted with himself and humble himself for his failures? In true contrition and humility of heart is born the hope of forgiveness; the troubled conscience is reconciled; lost grace is recovered; we are saved from future wrath; and God and the repentant soul meet in a holy embrace.

Humble sorrow for sins is an acceptable offering to you, Lord, far sweeter in your sight than the fragrance of burning incense. This is also the pleasing ointment which you wished to be poured on your holy feet, for you have never turned your back on a contrite and humble heart. The place of refuge from the enemy's angry face is here. At your feet whatever dirt one has picked up along life's journey is washed away.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you consider yourself a sinful person? If so, in what way? Do you experience a fundamental self-centeredness in your life? If so, where does it come from? Has it gotten worse over the years? Improved? Stayed basically the same?
2. How does God look upon your sinfulness? Does he condemn it? Ignore it? Forgive it? If he forgives it, what does he ask of you before extending forgiveness to you? Do you do what he asks? If not, what keeps you from doing it?
3. Do you turn to the Lord with a humble and contrite heart? If so, how do you do it? What does it mean in the concrete? Do you think you are able to do so on your own? What role does the Lord play in it? Just how far does his mercy extend?

Chapter Fifty-Three

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus instructs his disciple on the dangers of a worldly attitude of mind. God's grace is freely given. It cannot coexist with unclean spirits, but must cast them out. God will do so, however, only if we permit it. If we do not, then God respects our wishes and withholds the grace we need. If we want to become holy, we must ask the Lord to help us to overcome our selfish natures and to orient our lives totally toward him. We need to ask him to root out from our lives anything that represents an inordinate love of self, be that on the physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, or social levels of our lives. Self-centeredness is a major obstacle to receiving God's grace. It can be overcome only through our humble request for help.

That God's Grace Does Not Mix With the Wisdom of the World

Jesus:

My dear friend, my grace is precious. It does not allow itself to mix with anything else. You must, therefore, cast aside everything that stands in the way of grace if you wish it to pour over you. Seek a quiet place for yourself, and love to linger there alone. Do not look for idle chit-chat, but pour forth devout prayers to God that you may keep your mind focused on feeling deep sorrow for those times you have

failed him and on maintaining a clear conscience. Look upon the whole world as nothing without God, and prefer serving God to anything else. You cannot serve me and amuse yourself in passing fancies, too. Seek times for privacy even from friends and loved ones, and do not dwell on the comforts of this world. For this reason the blessed apostle Peter instructed the faithful followers of Christ to keep themselves as strangers and pilgrims in this world.

Oh, what confidence will that person have at death who is not held back by attachments to anything in the world! But a weak person cannot bear to have his heart cut loose from everything nor can one who clings to the world understand the freedom of one who does not. Yet, if a person truly wishes to have a spiritual life, he must place God first. And having placed God first, he must look to God's love as the most important thing in life. If you keep God at the center of your life, you will easily overcome all other things. The perfect victory is to be at one with God; the person who is, is master of himself and lord of the world.

If you wish to climb to this height, you must begin bravely and lay the axe to the root; pull up and destroy every movement toward self-centered, selfish desires. All that must be radically overcome is rooted in this vice of making yourself the center of your own world. When this evil is mastered and brought under control, great peace and calm will follow. But because few people strive to rise above themselves in such a way, they remain entangled in a fibery web and their spirits can never soar on high. Whoever wishes to walk freely with me must put an end to all excessive attachments and cling to no person or created thing out of a grasping self-love.

Imitating Christ

1. Are you hounded by any “unclean spirits?” Can you identify them? Which areas of your life are troubled by

inordinate attachments? How does self-centeredness manifest itself in your life?

2. What does it mean to have complete mastery over yourself? Does it mean that you will no longer be in touch with your sins and weaknesses? Does it mean that the root of self-centeredness will no longer be at the core of your heart? Does it mean that you will no longer need anyone? Not even God?
3. Do you treasure anyone or anything in your life more than God? A close friend? A particular possession? Yourself? Is there room in your heart for all of these? If so, are you slighting God in any way? How so? Does God treasure anything in his creation more than you?

Chapter Fifty-Four

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus talks about the differences between nature and grace. The nature he refers to is our fallen human nature, that aspect of our lives which is deeply affected by a basic self-centeredness. Although fundamentally good, human nature has been radically altered by the sin of human origins (referred in the tradition as “original sin”). The contrast between nature and grace represents the difference between the old man (represented by Adam in the Genesis story) and the new (represented by Christ). Through Christ’s death and

resurrection, we receive the grace to put on the new man and to walk in the way of the Spirit. The stark difference between the impulses of nature and of grace remind us that the journey from self-centeredness to God-centeredness is long and arduous. Even though we have been redeemed by Christ, the effects of his victory still need to take root in our lives.

Of the Differing Movements of Nature and Grace

Jesus:

My friend, pay particular attention to the movements of nature and grace, for they move in opposite ways and with such great subtlety that they can hardly be distinguished except by a spiritual and inwardly enlightened person. Certainly, everyone desires what is good, and everyone claims that there is something good in everything they say and do. Thus, many people are tricked by what seems to be good.

Nature is crafty and seduces many. It entangles them and deceives them, and it is always self-centered in the end. But grace walks in simplicity and turns away from all forms of evil. It offers no deceit and does everything purely for God, in whom it rests as its final goal.

Nature is unwilling to be mortified, to be held in check, to be overcome, to be less than others or to be under a yoke of obedience. But grace focuses on growing beyond self-centeredness, resisting sensuality, wanting to be submissive, desiring to be overcome, not exercising its own freedom, loving to be disciplined, and not wishing to dominate

anyone. It wants to live, to stay, and to be under God. For God's sake, grace is always willing to submit itself humbly to everyone.

Nature works for its own benefit and keeps an eye out for what it can gain from someone else. Grace, on the other hand, does not consider what is useful and advantageous to itself but what is beneficial to many. Nature willingly accepts honor and respect, but grace faithfully attributes all honor and glory to God. Nature is afraid of shame and contempt, but grace is happy to suffer reproach for the name of Jesus. Nature is lazy, but grace joyfully looks for something productive to do. Nature seeks to have curious and beautiful things and dislikes things common and rude, but grace delights in simple and humble things, does not reject those that are rough hewn, and does not refuse to wear old, shabby clothes.

Nature keeps an eye on fashion, it rejoices at material gain, it is depressed at loss, and it is irritated at every word that it even suspects might be an affront. But grace attends to eternal things and does not cling to passing ones, neither is it upset at the loss of material things nor is it provoked by every harsh word, for it places its joy and treasure in heaven where nothing perishes.

Nature is greedy and likes to take rather than to give, and it loves personal and private things. Grace, on the other hand, is kind and sharing, shuns selfishness, is content with little, and considers it more blessed to give than to receive.

Nature inclines a person to created things, to his own body, to vanities, and to scurrying about being busy. But grace draws one to God and to virtue, turns its back on anything that stands between it and God, does not get caught up in worldly affairs at the expense of spiritual ones, travels little, and blushes to appear in public.

Nature gladly accepts any outside comfort that may gratify

the senses, but grace seeks comfort in God alone and delights in the supreme good rather than in anything that is seen.

Nature does everything for its own gain and interest. It can do nothing without pay. In exchange for a kindness, it hopes for something equal or better in return—or else it demands praise or a favor—for it is eager to have its deeds and gifts be recognized by everyone. Grace seeks nothing temporal, though. It asks for no reward other than God alone, and it wants nothing more of this life than the necessities that may help it to gain eternal life.

Nature revels in many friends and relatives, glories in noble estates and impressive genealogies, smiles on those in power, flatters the wealthy, and applauds those who look and behave like itself. Grace, however, loves even its enemies, is not puffed up over a crowd of friends, and does not put much stock in rank or birth, unless it suggests greater virtue. Grace favors the poor to the rich, has more feeling for the innocent than the powerful, rejoices with the honest and not the false, and always encourages the good to desire better gifts and to become more like the Son of God by exercising virtue.

Nature is quick to complain of want and of trouble. Grace bears poverty resolutely. Nature turns all things to itself, pushes itself into the spotlight, and fights to keep itself there. Grace, though, refers all things to God, from whom they have all come. Grace ascribes no good to itself, nor does it arrogantly push itself forward. It does not argue or prefer its own opinion to others. In every feeling and understanding grace submits itself to eternal wisdom and divine scrutiny.

Nature longs to know secrets and to have the inside story on the latest news. It wishes to be seen in public and to be steeped in sensual experience. Nature wants to be noticed by others and to do those things that bring praise and admiration. But grace does not care to hear novel things or to

latch on to curious ideas, for all this springs from the old corruption. After all, nothing is new or lasting upon this earth. Grace teaches us, therefore, to restrain the senses, to avoid empty satisfaction and hollow display, and humbly to hide those things that are worthy of praise and admiration. Grace teaches us to seek what is useful to the soul and to quest after the praise and honor of God. Everything it has done and everything it has learned is directed to this end. Grace does not wish itself or what it has done to be praised, but wishes that God, who lavishes all things out of pure love, should be blessed in his gifts.

Grace is a supernatural light and a special gift of God, the distinguishing mark of his chosen ones. It is an assurance of eternal salvation. It raises a person from earthly things to the love of heavenly things, and it transforms him from a conceited, self-centered person into a spiritual one. The more nature is curbed and subdued, the more grace is poured in, and by the Lord coming to him anew each day, a person is refashioned after the image of God, deep within his soul.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you experience a struggle in your life between the impulses of nature and of grace? Is it an intense struggle? Is it an ongoing struggle? How conscious are you of it during the day?
2. Do you bring the difficulties of your underlying self-centeredness to prayer? Do you ask God's help to overcome it? Do you do so often? Never? Once in a while? Have you experienced that help? If so, in what ways?
3. Do the impulses of nature need to be suppressed or transformed? Does God's grace turn the carnal person

into the spiritual person by killing one and replacing it with the other or by gradually turning the one into the other? Where would you place yourself in this gradual process of conversion?

Chapter Fifty-Five

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple speaks of his inner sinfulness and asks Jesus for the grace to overcome it. Grace alone can help us win the battle between good and evil raging within us. Without it, we can do nothing to offset the powerful pull of our lowly passions. God dispenses his grace as he wishes. He desires all human beings to be saved and thus gives each person sufficient grace to pray. Like the disciple, we too must ask God for the grace to overcome our sinful tendencies and to walk in the way of the Spirit. If we do, we can be certain that our prayers will be answered. If we do not, the light of reason will remain buried under the ashes of our passions and we will be unable to keep ourselves from doing what we do not want to do.

Of Fallen Nature and of the Effect of Divine Grace

Disciple:

O Lord, my God, you have created me in your own image and likeness. Grant me this grace which you have shown to be of such great importance for salvation: that I may overcome my flawed nature that draws me to sin and ruin. In my body I feel the law of sin working against the law of my mind, leading me captive to obey fallen nature in many things. I cannot resist its urgings unless I am helped by your holy grace, ardently poured into my heart.

I need your grace—and I need it in great quantities—to overcome nature, which has been prone to evil from the beginning. Ever since nature fell and became infected by the sin of Adam, the first man, the punishments of that offense have fallen on all mankind. Nature itself, which you made good and without flaw, now represents vice and weakness; its natural tendency, if left to itself, drags everything down.

The little strength that remains is but the faint glow of an ember hidden beneath the ashes. It is natural reason itself, shrouded in great darkness, still having the ability to judge between good and evil, true and false. But it is not able to act on all that it knows to be right nor does it possess the full light of truth any longer or the absolute purity of its affections.

So it is, my God, that in the depths of my soul I delight in your law and know that your commands are good, just and holy, for they encourage us to flee from all evil and sin. And yet, as I am, I serve the law of sin, and all the while I obey sensuality rather than reason. Hence, it is within my power to want that which is good, but I cannot find the strength to achieve it. Hence, too, I often make many good plans, but because I lack grace to help my weakness, I pull back and hesitate at the slightest resistance. So it happens that I know the way of perfection and see clearly enough what I ought to do, but crushed under the weight of my own corruption, I do not pick myself up and press on to better things.

Oh, how absolutely necessary is your grace for me, Lord, if I

am to begin anything good, to continue on with it, and to see it through to the end. Without it, I can do nothing; with it strengthening me, I can do everything. O true heavenly grace, without which our merits are nothing and our natural abilities are worthless! No arts, no wealth, no beauty or strength, no wit or eloquence are of any value in your eyes, Lord, without grace.

The good and the bad share nature's gifts, but grace is the special gift of God's chosen ones. Being sealed with it, they are counted worthy of eternal life. This grace is so excellent that neither the gift of prophesy nor the working of miracles nor any flight of divine imagination is worth anything without it. Indeed, neither faith nor hope nor any of the other virtues is acceptable to you without grace and love.

Oh, most blessed grace! You make the poor in spirit rich in virtues, and you make those who are blessed with many good things humble of heart. Come, descend upon me. Fill me early in the morning with your comfort so that my soul does not faint through weariness and dryness. O Lord, I pray that I may find favor in your eyes. Your grace is enough for me even if I receive none of those things which nature desires. When I am tempted and afflicted with many troubles, I shall fear no evil as long as your grace is with me. It is my strength. It brings me comfort and help. It is stronger than all my enemies and wiser than all the wise. Your grace is the mistress of truth, teacher of discipline, light of the heart, comforter of the anguished. It banishes sorrow, chases away fears, nurses devotion, and brings tears to the eyes. Without your grace what am I but dried out tinder, a useless stump, fit only to be cast aside? Therefore, Lord, let your grace always go before me and follow me and make me ever intent upon good works, through Jesus Christ, your Son. Amen.

Imitating Christ

1. Are you involved in an inner struggle between good

and evil? How does this struggle manifest itself? To what extent are your feelings involved in this struggle? How is your mind involved in it? Does the struggle involve your spirit in any way? Your body? Your relationships?

2. Do you bring your struggles to God in prayer? Do you ask for his help to endure them? To overcome them? How often do you ask him? How do you ask him? Do you ask others to pray for you? Do you share your struggles with them? Do you pray together with them for this intention?
3. Do you believe that God gives you sufficient grace to pray, that it is God who enables you to pray and to ask for his help? Why is prayer so essential to your spiritual well-being? Do you believe that prayer is the great means of salvation?

Chapter Fifty-Six

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus and his disciple discuss the way of the cross. If we truly wish to follow Jesus as our Lord and master, we must shoulder our cross daily and walk in his footsteps. To walk the way of the cross means to unite our will with the will of the Lord. Where Jesus goes we must also desire to go—and with all our heart. Christian discipleship involves the discovery of self by means of

the denial of self. By humbling ourselves before one another, we rise above ourselves and come to recognize our true dignity as sons and daughters of God. Jesus, who is Emmanuel, “God with us,” walks by our side and shows us the way to the Father. His cross points to the empty tomb and the glory that he shares with the Father. Because of him, the crosses we bear do the same.

That We Should Turn from Ourselves and Imitate Christ by Way of the Cross

Jesus:

My dear friend, the more you can leave yourself behind, the more you will be able to enter into me. Just as longing for nothing outside of yourself makes for inner peace, so does letting go of yourself unite you with God. I want you to learn to abandon yourself perfectly to my will, without grumbling or complaining.

Follow me. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Without the Way, there is no going; without the Truth, there is no knowing; without the Life, there is no living. I am the Way you are to follow. I am the Truth you are to believe. I am the Life you are to hope for. I am the Way that cannot be destroyed, the Truth that cannot be wrong, the Life that cannot be ended. I am the Way that is most straight, the supreme Truth, the true Life, the blessed Life, begotten, not made.

If you continue in my way you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. You will have eternal life. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments. If you wish to know the truth, believe in me. If you wish to be perfect, sell

all that you have. If you wish to be my follower, deny your very self. If you wish to have a blessed life, see this present life for what it is. If you wish to be exalted in heaven, humble yourself in this world. If you wish to reign with me, carry my cross, for only the servants of the cross find the road of blessedness and true light.

Disciple:

Lord Jesus, since your life was lived within narrow confines, and since it was scorned by the world, grant that I may imitate you by bearing whatever burdens you choose to send me, for the servant is not greater than his lord nor is the student greater than his teacher. Let your servant be trained by the example of your life, for there will I find my salvation and true holiness. Whatever I read or hear apart from that neither refreshes nor delights me.

Jesus:

My dear friend, since you know these things and have read all about them, blessed will you be if you do them. Anyone who hears my commands—and keeps them—shall see me and shall sit with me in my Father's kingdom.

Disciple:

Lord Jesus, let it be as you have said and promised. Oh, that I may deserve it! I have shouldered the weight of your cross. I have taken it from your hands. You have placed it upon me, and I shall bear it, yes, even unto death. Truly, the life of a good monk—or of any good Christian—is a cross, but it is also his compass to paradise. Now that we have begun the journey, we must not go backward or give up.

So, come along! Let us go forward together! Jesus will be with us. For Jesus's sake we took up this cross; for Jesus's sake let us stick with it. Our Commander will be our helper. He has already scouted out the road. Look! our King

marches ahead of us and will fight for us! Let us follow him courageously; let no one shrink at the terror! Let us be ready to die bravely in battle! Let us not stain our glory by deserting the cross!

Imitating Christ

1. What crosses do you carry through life? How difficult are they to bear? Have you been carrying them for a long time? Has anyone helped you to bear them? Have you asked God for help in bearing them?
2. Why does discovery of self come by way of self-denial? Why must we humble ourselves to be exalted? Why is service so essential to our identity as disciples of Christ? To what extent must we learn to be served as well as to serve? Are both aspects important for the life of the disciple?
3. Does the cross always come before glory? Is it possible to talk about the joy of Christian life without the suffering that accompanies it? Is there such a thing as the “joy of the cross?” If so, of what does it consist? Did Jesus possess it? Do you? Do you wish to possess it?

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus and his disciple discuss the importance of patience and humility in the spiritual life. The Lord is more pleased by patience in times of trouble

than by devotion when all is going well. Adversity tests us and brings out our true metal. Our reaction to it reveals our true values and the depth of our reliance on God. This holds true especially for unexpected trouble, the kind we cannot anticipate and have no way of preparing for. When such trials come, all we can do is rely upon the inner resources we have at our disposal. If we have been growing in virtue and walking in the Spirit, then we will respond accordingly. If we have not been, then our anxieties and fearfulness will show their ugly heads.

That We Should Not Be Too Dejected When We Fail

Jesus:

My dear friend, patience and humility in troubled times are more pleasing to me than much comfort and devotion in prosperous ones. Why do you let little things said against you upset you so? Even if more had been said you should not have been disturbed. But let it go for now. It is nothing new. This is not the first time that it has happened, and if you live a long life, it will not be the last.

You are brave as long as no misfortune comes your way. You can give good advice, and you know how to strengthen others with your words. But when any calamity suddenly knocks at your door, your counsel and courage duck out the back way! Remember your great weakness which you have often experienced in small difficulties. Yet, these small difficulties—and others like them—were meant for your salvation each time they happened.

Put each trouble out of your heart as best you can. If it has touched you, do not let it knock you down or keep you caught in its web for long. If you cannot suffer it joyfully, at least suffer it patiently. And even if you would rather not hear such remarks, and feel irritated when you do, hold your tongue. Let no rash word slip from your mouth that may shock or disillusion those little ones who are new to the spiritual life. Your excitement will soon settle down and the return of grace will turn your inner sorrow into something sweet.

I am still ready to help you and comfort you even more than before, if you trust in me and call upon me in a prayerful way. Take courage and get set for even greater demands on your endurance. If you feel yourself often set upon or badly tempted, still all is not lost. You are not God; you are a human being. You are flesh; you are not an angel. How can you always carry on in unwavering virtue when Lucifer could not while he was in heaven nor could Adam while he was in paradise? I am the one who raises to safety those who mourn, and I am the one who invites you to share in my divinity. But I only advance those who recognize their own weakness.

Disciple:

Lord, blessed be your word, sweeter to my mouth than honey and the honeycomb. What would I do in my trials and tribulations if you did not strengthen me with your holy words? What does it matter how many trials I endure or what kind they may be as long as I come to a safe harbor in the end? Grant me a good end. Grant me a happy passage from this world. Remember me, my God, and lead me along the right path to your kingdom. Amen.

Imitating Christ

1. Are you easily hurt? Are you able to let small slights

and insults pass or do you get depressed by them? Why do you let them bother you? Are they really worth the trouble? Could the energy it takes being depressed over it be used for something more constructive?

2. How do you react to unexpected troubles? Do you become irritable and hot tempered? Are you able to keep your head? Do you tend to use foul speech or unnecessary expletives? Do you often regret your immediate reaction to such difficulties?
3. Do you believe not only that Jesus is still alive, but also that he is willing to help you and comfort you now more than ever? How deep is that belief? Would you hold on to it even in the midst of unexpected trouble? Would you be willing to go to prison for it? Would you be willing to die for it?

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus instructs his disciple not to engage in useless arguments about the mysteries of God's grace. To be conscious of one's sins and of one's smallness in virtue is far more pleasing to God than to be engaged in talk about which saint is greater in God's kingdom. It is equally useless to speculate about why some people receive more afflictions in this life than others. Such arguments divert us from our proper goal in

life: to grow in virtue and in holiness. We do this not through argument, but by imploring God to come to our aid and to help us in our time of need. Being overcurious about the mysteries of God's grace is often detrimental to our spiritual life. Instead of helping us to focus our attention on God, it trivializes the sacred and forces us to measure the "things of God" against a merely human yardstick.

Of Not Prying into Things That Are beyond Our Understanding

Jesus:

Dear friend, be wary of discussing lofty topics and God's hidden judgments. Do not ask why one person is so forsaken while another is raised up to such a grace, or why one person is so badly afflicted while another is highly exalted. These things are beyond our understanding, and no amount of reasoning or discussion can penetrate into the judgments of God. So, when the enemy suggests such things to you or curious people ask you about them, answer with the Prophet: "You are just, Lord, and your judgment is right." Or like this: "The judgments of the Lord are true, justified in themselves." My judgments are to be respected, not debated, for they are incomprehensible to human understanding.

In the same way, do not pry into or argue about the merits of the saints. Do not bicker over who is more holy or who is greater in the kingdom of heaven. Such questions often breed strife and useless contention, they nourish pride and presumption, and all this gives rise to envy and dissension, as one puts forward his saint and another proudly prefers his

own.

To wish to know such things and to pry into them does no one any good; instead, it greatly displeases the saints. I am not the God of strife but of peace, and this peace consists more in true humility than in patronage. Some people are drawn to one saint or another as suits their personal feelings, but these feelings come more from them than from me.

I am the one who made all the saints. I gave them grace. I am responsible for their glory. I know the merits of each. I went out and awaited each one with many blessings. I knew who my beloved ones would be before the beginning of time. I chose them from out of the world; they did not choose me. I called them by grace and attracted them by mercy. I led them safely through many temptations. I drenched them in lavish consolations. I gave them perseverance. I have crowned their patience. I know who is first and who is last. I embrace them all with a boundless love. I am to be praised in my saints, and above all I am to be blessed and honored in each one of them whom I have so gloriously magnified and chosen without any regard for any merits on their part.

Therefore, the person who looks down on one of the least of my saints shows no honor for the greatest, for I made both the small and the great, and anyone who detracts from even one of the saints detracts also from me and from all the others in the kingdom of heaven. They are all one through the bond of love: They all think the same thoughts; they all have the same desires; and they all love one another. But what is even more wonderful than this is that they all love me more than themselves and their own worth, for having been raised far above themselves, and having been drawn away from self-love, they are completely absorbed in their love of me. In me they rest and become complete. There is nothing that can turn them away from me or discourage them, for they are full of eternal Truth and they burn with the fire of divine love which will never go out.

Therefore, let those people who are caught up in the day-to-day business of asserting themselves, those people who love nothing but themselves and their own point of view, keep quiet about the status of the saints. They add and subtract from their glory as it suits their fancy and not as it pleases eternal Truth.

Many people behave this way out of pure ignorance. This is especially true of those spiritual dimwits who do not know how to love anyone as they should. They are drawn to one saint because his or her life is appealing, or to another saint because a friend likes him! They imagine that since that is the way things work on earth, they must work that way in heaven, too! There is an enormous gap between the thoughts of such a person and the thoughts of one who sees through eyes made clear by a heavenly light.

So be careful, my friend, of becoming too curious about things which outpace your understanding. Instead, aim at this: that you may be found in the kingdom of God even if you are the least important person there. And if anyone were to know which saint is the holier in the kingdom of heaven or which one is the greater, what good would this knowledge do him, unless knowing it, he would humble himself even more in my sight and give greater praise to my name?

That person is much more acceptable to God who thinks of the greatness of his own sins, of how little he has progressed in virtue, and of how far away he is from the perfection of the saints, than is the person who argues about who is the greater or lesser among them. It is better to call upon the saints with devout prayers and tears and with a humble mind to ask for their help than it is to nag them with silly questions. The saints are perfectly and completely content. Now, if only people would learn how to stop wagging their tongues!

The saints do not pride themselves on their own merits, for they ascribe nothing good to themselves but all to me,

because I gave them everything out of my infinite love. They are filled with so great a love for God and they have such an overflowing joy, that for them their glory lacks nothing, their happiness lacks nothing. It is this way with all the saints: The higher they are in glory, the more humble they are in themselves, the closer they are to me, and the more they are beloved by me. Thus, you have it written: “They cast down their crowns before God and fell on their faces before the Lamb, and they adored him who lives forever and ever.”

Many seek to discover who is the greatest in the kingdom of God without knowing if they themselves will be worthy to be numbered among the least. It is a great thing to be even the least in heaven where all are great, because all will be called and all will be children of God. The least will be priceless, and the sinner, though he may be a hundred years old, will die. When the disciples asked who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, they heard this reply: “Unless you turn yourselves around and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Therefore, whoever humbles himself like a child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Woe to those who think themselves too good to humble themselves willingly with the children, for the lowly gate of the heavenly kingdom will not allow them to enter. Woe also to the rich who have their comforts here, for while the poor shall enter into the kingdom of God, they will stand outside lamenting. Rejoice, you humble! Exult, you poor! The kingdom of God is yours if you walk in the way of truth!

Imitating Christ

1. Do you allow useless arguments to get in the way of your spiritual life? Do you do so often? Never? Once in a while? Is there a place for arguments in the Church? In your life? What benefit do you get from them?

2. Do you think much about the communion of saints? Do you have devotion to any particular saints? How do you look upon them in connection with the communion of saints as a whole? Do you think of this communion as the circle of the friends of God? Would you like to belong to that circle? How do the saints draw people closer to God?
3. Are you too curious about the ways of the Spirit? Not curious enough? Indifferent to them? How do you know? What guidelines do you follow to determine such a thing? What dangers can over curiosity have for the spiritual life? What dangers can lack of curiosity or outright indifference have for it?

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple tells of the importance of placing all our hope and trust in God. God wants to be our closest and most intimate friend. He alone can help us in our time of need. We can open our hearts and share all our burdens with him. We can ask him for help with our difficulties. We can look to his promises for comfort and encouragement. With God by our side, there is nothing to fear. He goes before us and prepares a way for us. He embraces us and consoles us. He protects us and preserves us. He extends his mercy to us and sanctifies

us. We should not be afraid to call upon his name. If we do so, all shall be well.

That All Hope and Trust Should Be Fixed on God Alone

Disciple:

Lord, what can I rely on in this life? What is my greatest comfort among all the things that appear under heaven? Is it not you, my Lord God, whose mercies are without number? When did things ever go well with me without you? When did things ever go badly with you at my side? I would rather be poor for your sake than rich without you. I would rather be a pilgrim wandering the earth with you than be in heaven without you. Where you are, there is heaven; where you are not, there is death and hell. You are everything I long for. Thus, I must sigh for you, cry out after you and prevail upon you. There is no one in whom I can fully confide for help in times of need except you alone, my God. You are my hope, my assurance, my comforter. You are faithful in all things.

Everyone looks out for himself. Only you look out for my salvation and progress and see to it that all things work to my good. Even if you expose me to temptations and hardships, you, who are given to testing your loved ones in a thousand ways, shape it all to my benefit. In testing me this way you should be loved and praised no less than if you had filled me with heavenly consolations. So in you, Lord God, I place all my hope and seek all my shelter. Before you I place all my troubles and anxieties. Everything that is not you I find frail and unstable. Having many friends will be of no help to me nor can powerful associates aid me. Prudent advisors cannot help me nor can learned books comfort me. Wealth cannot ransom me nor can any hidden place keep me safe. None of this will help if you yourself do not aid,

comfort, console, teach and care for me. All things that seem to be for our peace and happiness are nothing without you. Truly, they bring us no happiness at all.

You are the object of all good, the apex of life, the depth of wisdom. Your servants' greatest consolation is to hope in you above all things. I turn my eyes to you. In you, my God, Father of mercies, I place my trust. Bless my soul and make it holy with your heavenly blessing; let it become your holy dwelling, the place of your eternal glory. Let nothing be found in your temple that may offend the eyes of your majesty.

According to the greatness of your goodness and your many mercies, look down on me and hear the prayer of your poor servant, exiled far off in the land of the shadow of death. Protect and keep the soul of your servant, traveling amid the many dangers of life. By your grace, direct him along the path of peace until he is back home in the land of everlasting brightness. Amen.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you have a difficult time trusting others? Yourself? God? If so, why do you think that is? Can you think of any instances in your life where you were let down by someone you trusted?
2. What concrete evidence can you point to in your life that shows that you trust God? Is there a lot of evidence? A small amount? Hardly any? Would you like to trust God more? What would that mean for you concretely?
3. What does it mean to place all our hope and trust in God alone? Is such a goal realistic? Do you think it can be achieved? Have you ever met anyone who seems to

do so? Do *you*? What keeps you from doing so?

Book Four

The Book on the Sacrament

Introduction

The fourth book of *The Imitation* concerns devotion to the blessed sacrament. It opens with an extended scriptural invitation from the Lord to partake in the mysteries of his body and blood and continues the dialogue between the master and his disciple initiated in the Book Three. In eighteen short chapters, the author covers a wide range of themes that emphasize the importance of the eucharist for our spiritual lives. It encourages reverence in receiving Christ, respect for the dignity of the priesthood, frequent communion, and fervent love for the Lord. Despite the general importance of these themes, the book's heavy emphasis on private devotion and strong affective piety (a major current of late medieval spirituality) needs to be adapted to post-Vatican II sensitivities, which view devotion to the blessed sacrament as an important outgrowth of the church's communal liturgical celebrations. This necessary corrective invites us not to ignore the author's insights on the eucharist, but simply to view them in a different historical light. After having filtered the author's content through this important interpretative lens, the

significance of his presentation of eucharistic devotion as the final integrating point of the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways can be better appreciated for our own day and age.

Chapter One

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple comments on the voice of Christ heard in the opening scriptural references, especially the first: “Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you (Mt 11:28).” These words are Christ’s words, yet also belong to us. They are meant for us and remind us of the open invitation we have to approach the Lord and live in intimate communion with him. This invitation is extended most clearly in the eucharist, when we receive the body and blood of Jesus in holy communion. When we go to the Lord in this way, it is important for us to be properly prepared. Most of us do not have to travel very far to enter into the presence of our Lord and Savior. If Jesus has gone to all the trouble to make himself present to us in the form of bread and wine, we should be ready to receive him with the proper reverence and respect.

With What Great Reverence Christ Should be Received

The Voice of Christ

Come to me all you who labor and are burdened, and I shall refresh you. The bread that I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh. Take and eat; this is my body, which is given for you. Do this in memory of me. If you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you will abide in me and I in you. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

Disciple:

These are your words, Christ, the eternal Truth, though they were not said all at one time nor written all in one place. Therefore, since they are yours and they are true, I should receive them all with gratitude and certainty. They are your words and you have spoken them; they are also mine, for you have said them for my salvation. I accept them gladly from your lips that they may be the more deeply imprinted on my heart.

Words filled with such great tenderness, sweetness and love stir me, but my own sins frighten me and my muddled conscience holds me back from sharing in such great mysteries. Your sweet words call me to you, but my many offenses weigh me down. You command me to come to you with confidence if I wish to share your life and to receive the food of immortality, if I wish to gain eternal life and glory.

“Come to me,” you say, “all you who labor and are burdened, and I shall refresh you.” Oh, sweet and lovable words to the ear of one who constantly disappoints you, that you, O Lord, my God, invite the poor and the needy to Communion in your most sacred Body. But who am I, Lord, that I should presume to come to you? The heaven of heavens cannot contain you and yet you say, “Come to me, all of you.” What does this mean, this most loving deference and friendly invitation? How can I dare to come, I who know of not a single good thing that I have done to deserve your love? How can I bring you into the place where I live, I who

have so often offended you in front of your own loving eyes? Angels and archangels stand before you in awe, the saints and all the good people who have ever lived hold you in great reverence, and still you say, “Come to me, all of you.”

Except that you said this yourself, Lord, who would believe it to be true? And except that you commanded it, who would dare try to approach? Think of this: Noah, a just man, worked a hundred years at building the ark in order that he and a few others might be saved. How can I—in one hour—prepare myself to receive with reverence the Creator of the world? Moses, your great servant and special friend, built an ark of incorruptible wood, which he covered with the purest gold in order to put away the tablets of the Law for safekeeping. Shall I, then, a wholly unworthy person, dare to receive you so lightly, the maker of the Law and the giver of life? Solomon, the wisest of Israel’s kings, spent seven years building a magnificent temple in praise of your name, and for eight days he celebrated the feast of its dedication and sacrificed a thousand peace offerings, and with resounding trumpets and much joy he solemnly brought the ark of the Covenant to the place prepared for it. And I, who know in my own heart how unworthy I am, how shall I bring you into my home? Why, I scarcely know how to spend a half-hour in devout prayer. If only I could spend even that half-hour as I should!

O my God, how much they tried to please you! Alas! how little it is that I do! How little time I spend in preparing myself for Communion. Rarely am I entirely at one with myself, and even more rarely am I wholly free of distractions. Yet, surely, when I am in your saving presence no improper thought should occupy me nor should my mind wander to other things. It is not an angel but the Lord of angels that I am about to welcome as my guest. There is a vast difference between the ark of the Covenant with its relics and your most pure Body with its unutterable virtues;

there is a vast difference between the sacrifices of the Law, which prefigured future events, and the true sacrifice of your Body, which completes all the ancient sacrifices.

Why then do I not burn with greater love in your holy presence? Why do I not prepare myself with greater care to receive your sacred gifts when those ancient, holy patriarchs, prophets, kings, and princes—together with all their people—showed such great love and devotion in worshiping you? The devout King David danced before the ark of God with all his might, recalling the blessings granted to his ancestors in times past. He invented various kinds of instruments, he composed psalms, and he taught his people how to sing them joyously. Filled with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he himself often played on the harp, and he taught Israel to praise God with all their hearts and with one voice to bless and proclaim him each and every day.

If the devotion and praise of God shown then in the presence of the ark of the Covenant was so great, then how great now should be the reverence and devotion of myself and of all Christian people in the presence of the Sacrament, in receiving the most excellent Body of Christ? Many people scurry about to various places to visit the relics of the saints and are amazed to hear of their marvelous deeds, to gaze at their splendid shrines, and to kiss their sacred bones, wrapped in silk and gold. But look! you are present to me here on the altar, my God, Holy of Holies, Creator of human beings, and Lord of angels. Often curiosity and the desire to see new things lead people to make pilgrimages. They seldom change their lives as a result, though, especially if they run from place to place with no real change of heart.

But in the Sacrament of the altar you are fully present, my God, in the person of Jesus Christ, and each time that you are worthily and devoutly received we enjoy the abundant fruit of eternal salvation. We are certainly not drawn to this Sacrament lightly nor are we drawn out of curiosity or a desire to please our appetites; rather, firm faith, devout hope

and sincere love draw us to you. O God, unseen Creator of the universe, how wonderfully you treat us; how sweetly and graciously you care for those whom you have chosen to be your own, those to whom you offer yourself in this Sacrament. This surpasses all understanding, and it is this in particular that draws the hearts of devout people to you and that causes the soft glow of their love to burst into flame. Your true, faithful ones—those who spend their whole lives trying to change their ways—often receive the great grace of devotion and the love of doing what is right from this most worthy Sacrament.

O admirable and hidden grace of this Sacrament, which only Christ's faithful ones know! Those who lack faith and those who are the slaves of sin cannot experience such grace. In this Sacrament spiritual grace is granted, the soul's lost strength is restored, and its beauty, often disfigured by sin, returns again. And sometimes this grace is so great that, through the fullness of the devotion offered to God, not only the mind, but the weakened body as well, feels an increase in strength.

Hence, we should feel great sorrow and regret because of our coolness and negligence toward the Body of Christ; we should feel great sadness and disappointment for not being drawn with greater love to receive our Lord, in whom rests all the hope and merit of salvation. He himself is our path to holiness, our way to salvation; it is he who comforts us on our journey and who is the eternal happiness of the saints. So it is most sad to see that many people have such little regard for this saving mystery, this mystery that delights heaven and keeps the entire world intact.

Oh, how blind and hard is the human heart that does not pay greater attention to such a splendid gift as the Body of Christ. By making Communion a daily habit some people grow indifferent toward it. If in the whole world this most holy Sacrament were celebrated in only one place and were consecrated by only one priest, how great do you think

people's desire would be to go to that place and to that priest of God so that they could see the divine mysteries celebrated? But now there are many priests, and Christ is offered up in many places, so that God's grace and his love for us appear the greater the more widely Holy Communion is distributed throughout the world.

I thank you, good Jesus, eternal Shepherd, for choosing to nourish us with your precious Body and Blood and for inviting us by your own words to share in these mysteries, saying: "Come to me all you who labor and are burdened, and I shall refresh you."

Imitating Christ

1. Do you believe that Jesus makes himself present to us at Mass under the forms of bread and wine? Do you believe that they actually become his body and blood? If so, do you receive him often? What concrete effect does holy communion with Jesus have on your life?
2. How do you prepare yourself to receive Jesus in the eucharist? Do you follow the church's norm of the one hour fast? Do you try to quiet yourself beforehand? Do you pray to Jesus? If so, how? What do you ask for? Do you seek reconciliation?
3. Do you approach the Lord in the eucharist with the proper reverence? What effect does such reverence have on your relations with others? Does it increase your consciousness of their fundamental human dignity? Does it give you a deeper reverence for Christian community to which you belong?

Chapter Two

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple extols God's great love manifested in the eucharist. The Lord's goodness and mercy are without end. He allows us not only to approach him, but also to eat his body and drink his blood. For this reason, he deserves our deepest gratitude and highest praise. At his banquet, we gather as a community to participate in the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. As members of his body, we are immersed in Christ's saving mysteries and are healed and made holy by the graces we receive in this sacrament. Through it, Christ continues to dwell in our midst and in our hearts. Through it, we enter into the midst of Christ and are able to dwell within his heart. What greater gift could anyone hope for?

What Great Goodness and Love God Shows to Us in This Sacrament

Disciple:

Trusting in your great goodness and mercy, Lord, I come as one sick to the Healer, as one hungry and thirsty to the Source of life, as a beggar to the King of heaven, as a servant to the Lord, as a created being to the Creator, as one forsaken to my compassionate Comforter. But why should you come to me? Who am I that you should give yourself to me? How does someone like me dare to appear before you?

And how can you stoop to come to me?

You know me, and you know that I am nothing at all apart from you, so why should you grant me this favor? I confess my unworthiness, and I acknowledge your goodness; I praise your kindness, and I thank you for your great love. You do this because you want to do it, not because I deserve it. You do this in order that your goodness may be better known to me, that your love may be more fully engendered in me, and that humility may be more attractive to me. So, since this pleases you, and because you have ordered it to be so, your regard for me pleases me too. Grant that my unworthiness may not get in the way!

O sweet and kind Jesus, what reverence and gratitude I owe to you; what unending praise should be yours each time I receive your sacred Body. No one can adequately explain what such a profound gift means. But what thoughts should be in my mind as I approach my Lord in this intimate sharing? I have never been able to worship you as I should, yet I wish to receive you with great devotion! What can I do that is better or of greater worth to my soul than to humble myself fully before you and to praise your goodness that is infinitely above me?

I praise you, my God, and I exalt you forever, but I look down upon myself and prostrate myself before you in my profound unworthiness. You see, you are the Saint of saints, and I am the sorriest of sinners. You, you see, bend down to me, who am unworthy to look up to you. And look! you come to me; you want to be with me; and you invite me to your banquet! You wish to give me heavenly food and the bread of angels to eat—nothing else, indeed, than your very self, the living bread who came down from heaven and who gives life to the world!

See from what place such love comes, how excellent the honor that radiates from it! What great thanksgiving and praises are due to you for this gift of yourself! Oh, how

healing and helpful was your plan to give us this Sacrament! How sweet and joyful the banquet in which you gave yourself as food! Oh, how wonderful is your work, Lord, how powerful your goodness, and how forthright your truth! You spoke and all things were made; you willed it to be, and this Sacrament was made, too. It is a thing of wonder and a thing worthy of our faith that goes far beyond human understanding that you, O Lord, my God—true God and true man—are fully present under the appearance of bread and wine and that you are eaten by those who receive you, without being consumed!

Lord of all things, who have need of nothing, you have chosen to live among us through this Sacrament. Keep my heart and my body unblemished so that with a happy and pure conscience I may often celebrate and receive your mysteries for my eternal salvation—your mysteries, which you have given to us and made holy for your honor, celebrated forever in memory of you. Rejoice, my soul, and give thanks to God for leaving to you in this valley of tears so noble a gift, so unique a comfort. As often as we celebrate this mystery anew and receive the Body of Christ, so often do we perform the work of our redemption, and so often do we share in all those things that Christ has earned. Christ's love never fades, and his immense graciousness is never exhausted.

Therefore, we should always prepare ourselves for this Sacrament with a mind that is alert and receptive, seriously pondering this great mystery of salvation. Whenever we celebrate or attend Mass it should be as great, as new and as joyful as if on that same day Christ had just descended into the Virgin's womb to become our brother, or as if he were hanging on the cross suffering and dying for our salvation.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you believe that the eucharist is the font and summit of the Christian life? Does your entire day,

entire week revolve around it? Do you look forward to it? Is it something you cannot do without?

2. The eucharist is often described in terms of banquet, presence, and sacrifice. Do you understand it in these terms and what they signify? Which do you identify with most strongly? Which understanding do you need more growth in?
3. “Eucharist” means “thanksgiving.” Do you thank the Lord for the gift of the eucharist? How do you thank him? Do you do so by celebrating it with more reverence and devotion? By celebrating it more often? By receiving the Lord in holy communion more frequently?

Chapter Three

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple emphasizes the importance of receiving the Lord frequently at the eucharist. We who now take frequent reception of the eucharist for granted should recognize that such a practice was not always commonplace in the Church. In the past, it was sometimes necessary for spiritual writers to encourage their readers to trust in God’s merciful love to receive holy communion more often. We should look at frequent communion as a way of avoiding evil and being confirmed in the good. To receive the graces of the

sacrament, however, we must be properly disposed. We do this by humbly admitting our failings to the Lord and asking him to prepare our hearts for his wondrous coming.

How It Is Helpful to Receive Communion Often

Disciple:

Look, Lord! I come to you so that your gift may help me and so that I may delight in your holy banquet, which you, O God, in your sweetness have prepared for us. You see, you are all that I can or should desire; you are my salvation and redemption, my hope and my strength, my honor and my glory. Therefore, give joy to the soul of your servant this day, for to you, Lord Jesus, I lift up my soul.

Now I wish to receive you with devotion and reverence; I long to bring you into my house, so that like Zacchaeus, I may be worthy of your blessing and may be numbered among the children of Abraham. My soul deeply yearns for your Body; my heart longs to be one with you. Give yourself to me and that will be enough, for no comfort satisfies me apart from you. I cannot live without you; without you, I am unable to exist. Therefore, I must come to you often and receive you as the medicine of my salvation, lest, deprived of this heavenly food, I should faint in my journey through life. In just this way, most merciful Jesus, while you were preaching to the people and healing various diseases, you once said: "I am unwilling to send them home with nothing to eat, lest they faint on the way." Treat me as you treated them, you who have left yourself in this Sacrament for the comfort of your faithful ones, for you are the sweet refreshment of the soul, and whoever shall partake of you

worthily shall inherit and share in eternal glory.

It is most necessary for me, who waver and sin so often and who so quickly become lazy and falter, that by frequent prayers and confessions and by receiving your holy Body, I may renew, purify, and enkindle myself. If I stay away from you too long, I may fall away from my holy resolve. Because we are so attracted to the values of this world, we continually drift away from you, and unless divine medicine is brought to us quickly, we soon find ourselves lost and alone. Holy Communion draws us back to you and comforts us in your goodness.

If I am so often careless and lukewarm when I go to Holy Communion or celebrate Mass, what would happen if I did not receive this medicine or seek your help? Though I may not be in the proper frame of mind to celebrate or attend Mass daily, still I should try to receive the divine mysteries at suitable times and make myself a participant in so great a grace. The faithful soul's chief comfort, while far away from you and traveling through life, is remembering God often and receiving the Lord with great devotion.

Oh, the marvelous goodness and kindness that you show to us that you, Lord God, Creator and giver of life, lower yourself to come to such a poor soul, and with the fullness of your divinity and humanity satisfy her hunger! O happy mind and blessed soul that deserves to receive you, the Lord God, with devotion, and in receiving you is filled with spiritual joy! Oh, how great a lord the soul receives! What a beloved guest she brings into her home! What a sweet companion she greets! What a faithful friend she welcomes! What a beautiful and noble spouse she embraces! I love you beyond all loves and beyond all desires!

My sweet beloved, let heaven and earth and all their array be silent in your presence, for whatever they have of loveliness and worth, they are all your gifts. They can never rise to the splendor of your name, whose wisdom is beyond all

measure.

Imitating Christ

1. How often do you receive the eucharist? Each time you go to Mass? Hardly ever? Only once in a while? Are you properly disposed for it? Do you confess any serious sins you might have before receiving?
2. Do you believe that receiving the eucharist helps you to do good and avoid evil? If so, how does it help you? With which does it help you more? Can you think of any arguments for not receiving the eucharist frequently?
3. Do you believe that receiving the eucharist is an important way for living in communion with Jesus? Do you agree that in this intimate communion Jesus assumes the role of friend, bridegroom, and beloved? What other concrete means sustain this relationship for you? How are they oriented toward the eucharist?

Chapter Four

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple describes the blessings of receiving holy communion with devotion. The eucharist is the remedy for every spiritual illness. Those who receive it with devotion have their bad habits healed, their unruly passions calmed, their temptations lessened, and their virtues quickened. The graces they receive confirm

them in hope, strengthen them in hope, and deepen their love for God and neighbor. Those who eat and drink the body and blood of Christ are eventually transformed into new persons. Having gone through the painful experience of their own weakness, they come to realize that all good things come from the Lord. This insight is worthy of our gratitude.

That Many Good Things Are Given to Those Who Devoutly Receive Communion

Disciple:

My Lord God, give your sweet blessing to your servant so that I may be made worthy to approach your most generous Sacrament. Awaken my heart, and free me from this great apathy. Come to me with your saving grace that I may spiritually taste your sweetness, a sweetness which lies hidden at the very source of your Sacrament. Enlighten also my eyes, that I may gaze into so great a mystery, and strengthen me to believe it with a faith unclouded by doubt.

This is your work; we cannot do it. This is your sacred institution; it is not something we made up. No one can grasp and comprehend this mystery alone; it even soars beyond the subtle understanding of the angels. How can I, then, as unworthy as I am—a creature of mere dust and ashes—be able to probe into so profound a secret and understand it? O Lord, in the simplicity of my heart, in good and firm faith, and at your command I come to you with hope and reverence. I truly believe that you—God and man—are present here in the Sacrament. You want me to receive you; you want me to be one with you in love.

So I ask your mercy, and I beg you to give me a special grace that I may utterly dissolve in you and overflow with your love and never again seek anything apart from you. This most high and worthy Sacrament is the health of the soul and body, the medicine that cures every spiritual illness. In this Sacrament my weaknesses are cured and my passions are held in check, my temptations are overcome or they become less burdensome, grace is more greatly infused, virtue once started now increases, faith is made firm, hope is strengthened, and love's embers are fanned into flames, spreading ever wider.

O my God, protector of my soul, healer of human weakness, and giver of all inward comfort, you have given—and you continue to give—many good things in this Sacrament. Through it, you comfort your beloved people in every trial, and you lift them from the depths of dejection to the hope of your protection. You continually refresh and enlighten them with some new grace. Though they may at first have felt uneasy and unloving before Holy Communion, afterward they always find themselves changed for the better, having restored themselves with this heavenly food and drink.

You deal with your loved ones in this way so that they may truly admit and clearly experience their own weakness, so that they may acknowledge your great goodness and grace. Of themselves they are cold, hard, and without devotion; through your mercy they become fervent, eager and devout. Who can humbly approach the fountain of sweetness and not carry away a little taste of it? Who can stand near a blazing fire and not grow warm? You, Lord, are a fountain that is always full and overflowing, a fire that always burns and never dies out. If I may not draw from the fountain's fullness nor drink my fill, yet I shall place my mouth to the spout of that heavenly spring that I may sip from it a tiny drop to relieve my thirst and to keep me from drying up entirely.

And if I am not yet ready to be entirely heavenly and to burn as the cherubim and seraphim, I shall still try to apply myself

to devotion and prepare my heart so that I may gain a small spark of divine fire by humbly receiving this life-giving Sacrament. Whatever is lacking in me, good Jesus, holy Savior, from your bounty and goodness, please supply it to me, for you have called each of us to you, saying: “Come to me all you who labor and are burdened, and I shall refresh you.”

Indeed, I labor with great difficulty, and my heart is twisted with sorrow. I am crushed with sin, and I am unsettled by temptation. I am entangled and oppressed by my weaknesses, one on top of another. There is no one to help me, no one to set me free and save me, but you, Lord God, my Savior. I entrust myself and all that is mine to you, that you may protect me and lead me to eternal life.

You who have prepared your Body and Blood for my food and drink, receive me for the praise and glory of your name. Grant me, O Lord, God of my salvation, that by frequently receiving your mysteries the intensity of my love and devotion to you may ever increase.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you believe that the eucharist is the “medicine of immortality?” Do you believe that it can cure every spiritual illness? Have you ever experienced such a cure in your own life?
2. Familiarity, it is said, breeds contempt. Does frequent reception of the eucharist increase or decrease your devotion to Christ’s eucharistic presence? Is there such a thing as receiving holy communion too often? If so, how often would that be?
3. What is the relationship between the eucharist and the virtues of faith, hope, and charity? Does receiving the

eucharist with devotion increase or decrease their influence in your life? How do these virtues manifest themselves in your life concretely?

Chapter Five

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus speaks about sacerdotal dignity. No one deserves to be ordained a priest. To exercise this ministry means to be specially chosen by the Lord to follow in his footsteps. Priests must strive for holiness at all times. They must rely on the promises of God's word and realize that they have done nothing to merit the office they exercise. When a priest celebrates Mass, he stands in the place of Christ and intercedes for his people. Ever mindful of this intercessory role, he should celebrate Mass with great faith and devotion. He should never grow weary of offering prayers up for the people he has been called to serve. When he does so, he gives glory to God, brings blessings to the Church, and help to the faithful, living and dead.

Of the Dignity of the Sacrament and of the Priesthood

Jesus:

If you had the purity of angels and the holiness of St. John

the Baptist, you would still not be worthy to receive this Sacrament, for it is not due to any human merits that a priest consecrates Christ's Sacrament and receives as food the bread of angels. Awesome is the ministry and great is the dignity of priests. Priests do what even angels cannot do! Only priests, duly ordained by the church, are able to celebrate Mass and consecrate the Body of Christ.

The priest is truly the minister of God, using the word of God at his command and institution, but God is present as the principal author and the invisible worker. All is subject to God as he wills; all obey as he commands. In this most excellent Sacrament, then, you ought to trust more in the all-powerful God than in your own opinion or in anything that you see. You should approach this Sacrament with profound awe and deep reverence. Take a look at yourself and see what ministry has been entrusted to you by the laying on of the bishop's hands. Look! you have been made a priest and have been consecrated to celebrate Mass. See that you offer the sacrifice to God faithfully and devoutly at the proper time, and see that your life is above reproach.

You have not lightened your burden by becoming a priest, you have increased it. A priest should shine in every virtue and should be a model for others. His path in life should not be an ordinary one, but one that leads to perfection and holiness. A priest wearing sacred vestments acts in Christ's place and humbly entreats God for himself and for all people. On his vestments he wears the sign of the Lord's cross before him and behind him that he may continually remember Christ's Passion. He carries the cross before him on the chasuble that he may carefully observe Christ's footsteps and fervently strive to follow them. He is sealed with the sign of the cross behind him that he may calmly suffer for God's sake whatever trials are laid upon him by others. He wears the cross in front that he may weep for his own sins, and he wears it in back that he may mourn for the sins of others, knowing all the while that he has been placed

midway between God and the entire human family. A priest must never grow weary of prayer and the holy sacrifice until he has achieved grace and mercy.

When a priest celebrates Mass he honors God, delights the angels, builds the church, helps the living, assures rest for the dead, and shares in all good things.

Imitating Christ

1. What is your attitude toward priests? Do you respect them? Do you listen to them? Do you respect their authority? Do you have any negative attitudes toward them? Are you suspicious of them in any way?
2. What is your understanding of the relationship between the ordained priesthood and the priesthood of Christ? What is your understanding of the relationship between the ordained priesthood and the priesthood of all believers? Are these relationships clear in your mind? Do you think you need to study them or ask someone to explain them to you?
3. If you had a son, how would you feel if he told you he wanted to become a priest? Would you be happy with his decision? Would you be sad? Indifferent? Would you support him in his decision? Would you try to discourage him?

Chapter Six

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple asks Jesus for instructions

on how to prepare for holy communion. We should follow the disciple's example and not take the reception of this sacrament for granted. If in the past, many people stayed away from the sacrament out of fear of receiving the sacrament unworthily, many today seem to receive it without taking the state of their souls fully into account. We reverence the Lord when we prepare ourselves to receive his body and blood. Even a short prayer recited before Mass begins or as we approach the priest on the communion line can go a long way in helping us to ready ourselves for the gift we are about to receive.

The Question of Preparing Before Communion

Disciple:

O Lord, when I ponder your greatness and my unworthiness, I am badly shaken and confused, for if I do not receive you in Holy Communion, I shun life, and if I receive you unworthily, I offend you. So, what shall I do, my God, my helper, my advisor in every need? Teach me the right way. Show me what to do to prepare for Holy Communion. It is important that I know how to ready my heart, that I may devoutly and reverently receive your Sacrament for my well-being. It is important if I am to celebrate so great and sacred a sacrifice.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you examine your conscience before going to communion? Most of the time? Every so often? Hardly

ever? Have you ever not received the eucharist because something in particular was bothering you? If so, what did you do about it?

2. Have you ever been afraid of approaching the table of the Lord? Was that fear well-founded? Did the fear paralyze you? How did you deal with it? Did you ask the Lord for help?
3. Do you have a particular routine that you go through before receiving the eucharist? Do you spend any time in prayer? Do you share your fears with God? Do you tell the Lord what is on your mind? What effect does this preparation have on your appreciation of the sacrament?

Chapter Seven

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus tells us how to purify our souls before receiving holy communion. Like priests, we should approach the altar with deep reverence and humility. We should be sorry for our sins and grieve over our daily lapses. If we have time, we should confess our sins to the Lord in the depths of our hearts. There are so many things we should regret, from our lack of forgiveness to our lack of attention in prayer to our inability to carry out our resolutions. Before we receive holy communion, we need to set some time aside to

examine our hearts and to ask God's forgiveness for our sins and failings. Only in this way can we hope that the sacrament we are about to receive will bring effect a gradual conversion in our lives.

Of Examining One's Conscience, and of Planning to Change for the Better

Jesus:

Above all else a priest of God should come to celebrate, to handle and to receive this Sacrament with deep humility and profound reverence, with full faith and with the firm intention of honoring God. Examine your conscience carefully, and cleanse and purify it as best you can by being truly sorry for your sins and by humbly confessing them. If you do so, nothing will weigh on your conscience, and nothing will cause remorse that may keep you from me. Be sorry for all of your sins in general; in particular, regret your daily offenses, and be especially sorry for them. If you have time, confess to God in the secret recesses of your heart the pain that your failings have caused you. Bemoan and be full of sorrow that you are such a divided person, so alive to your passions, so full of lust, so volatile in your feelings, so entangled with foolish notions, so inclined to gratifying yourself, so neglectful of your inner life, so prone to the collapse of your moral resolve, so ready to avoid your own conscience, so ready to relax, so slow to rigor and zeal, so curious to listen to gossip and waste time, so remiss in embracing the humble and poor, so greedy in getting, so stingy in giving, so tightfisted in keeping, so inconsiderate in what you say, so reluctant in keeping silent, so undisciplined in behavior, so rash in what you do, so ready in eating, so deaf to God's word, so quick to rest, so slow to work, so

awake to hear stories, so sleepy at vigils, so eager for devotions to end, so wandering in attention, so negligent in reciting the Office, so indifferent in celebrating Mass, so matter-of-fact in receiving Holy Communion, so quickly distracted, so seldom at one with yourself, so suddenly moved to anger, so easily offended by others, so prone to judge, so harsh in correcting others, so happy in good times, so depressed in bad times, so often making good resolutions, and so reluctant in carrying them out.

After you have confessed these failings—and your others, too—and after you have felt sorry for them and have expressed great remorse, firmly resolve to change your life and to do better. Then, by the complete resignation of your will, offer yourself to me as a perpetual sacrifice on the altar of your heart. Faithfully entrust your body and soul to me, so that you may become worthy to approach my altar to offer sacrifice to God and to receive the Sacrament of my Body for your salvation.

There is no offering more worthy—no satisfaction greater—for the washing away of sins than to offer yourself purely and completely to God at the same time that the Body of Christ is offered in the Mass and in Communion. If a person does all that he can do and resolves from the very bottom of his heart to change his ways, then as often as he comes to me for pardon and grace I shall give it to him, saying: “As I live, I do not want the death of the sinner. I want him to turn from his ways and live. I shall no longer remember his sins; all will be forgiven him.”

Imitating Christ

1. Do you approach the eucharist with reverence and humility of heart? Are you conscious that you are about to come into contact with the sacred? How do you cross that threshold? What helps you to go into the presence of God?

2. Before receiving the eucharist, do you grieve over your past sins? Do you lament your petty habits and inability to change? Do you lament some more than others? Do you ask the Lord to help you overcome them?
3. Does receiving the eucharist help you to live in hope? Does it help you to believe in your eventual conversion? Does it confirm you in your Christian identity and in your desire to serve the Lord with all your heart?

Chapter Eight

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus speaks of his offering of himself on the cross and encourages us to do the same, especially at Mass. If we truly wish to be Christ's disciples we must offer ourselves to God with all our hearts. Jesus held nothing back from the Father when he offered himself on the cross for our sins. If we wish to be like him, we must follow his example. He desires nothing else from us. Everything we do must be involved in this offering of self to Christ. The eucharist draws us into close communion with Christ's total offering of self. It gives us the grace to do what we cannot accomplish on our own. Through it, we are able to transcend our petty weaknesses and love as Christ loves.

Of Christ's Offering on the Cross, and of Our Own Self-Surrender

Jesus:

With my hands outstretched on the cross and my body naked, I freely offered myself to God the Father for your sins. Nothing was left in me that was not given to God. In the very same way—with all your strength and love—you too should willingly offer yourself to me each day in the Mass as a pure and holy offering.

What more do I ask of you than yourself? I do not care at all for anything else that you may give me. I do not seek your gift. I seek you. Just as it would not satisfy you to have anything but me, so it does not please me to have anything you may give, if you do not give yourself. Offer yourself to me and give your entire self for God. Such an offering will be accepted. Look, I offered all of myself to the Father for you. I gave my entire Body and Blood for your food so that I might be all yours and you might be all mine. If you hold back and will not resign yourself to my will without having second thoughts, then your offering is not perfect nor will we become perfectly at one.

So, if you wish to achieve a free spirit and gain my grace, everything you do must be preceded by a spontaneous offering of yourself into the hands of God. This is why so few people become enlightened and inwardly free: Most do not know how to give themselves to me completely. I have said this, and I mean it: “Unless a person renounces all that he has, he cannot be my follower.” So, if you wish to be my disciple, give yourself to me with your whole heart.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you ever meditate upon Christ's offering of himself on Calvary? Do you look upon it as something to

which you too are called? Do you think of it as something impossible to achieve?

2. Do you ever think of Christ's sacrifice of love in the context of the eucharist? Do you ever think of it in terms of your reception of the eucharist? What does the eucharistic sacrifice have to do with your own call to discipleship?
3. Do you offer yourself to Christ in the events of the day? If so, how do you do it? Is there anything in your life that you find difficult to offer to him? Do you talk to God about it? Do you ask for his help?

Chapter Nine

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple expresses his desire to offer his whole life to God. Through this act, he freely unites all the sufferings of his life with those of Christ. In doing so, his life becomes an offering of self for all humanity. We too can join in this heartfelt prayer to the Lord. All we need to do is open our hearts, humbly confess our sins, and ask for his mercy. By uniting our suffering with Christ's, we form a unique bond of solidarity with all who suffer. We become a source of hope for them and with them look forward to the day when all suffering will come to an end and the fullness of God's glory will be made manifest. Until that time, we

continue to offer ourselves to the Lord and to trust in his merciful love.

That We Ought to Offer Ourselves and All That Is Ours to God, and That We Ought to Pray for All Others

Disciple:

O Lord, all things in heaven and on earth are yours. I wish to give myself to you as a voluntary offering and to remain forever yours. Lord, in the simplicity of my heart I offer myself to you today as your servant until the end of time. I wish to serve you in humble obedience and as a gift of eternal praise. Receive me, together with this holy sacrifice of your precious Body which I offer to you today in the presence of your angels—your unseen helpers, that it may benefit me and contribute toward the salvation of all your people.

Lord, on your altar of forgiveness I offer you all of the sins and offenses which I have committed in your sight and in the sight of your holy angels from the day that I was first capable of sin right up to this present hour. Burn them and consume them all in the fire of your love. Remove the stains of my sin and cleanse my conscience. Restore your grace to me, which I lost by sin, forgiving everything and mercifully adopting me into your family with a kiss of peace.

What can I do with my sins except humbly confess them and weep for them and forever beg your forgiveness? O my God, mercifully hear me as I stand before you and earnestly ask this of you. All of my sins are repugnant to me. I do not want to commit them ever again. I am sorry for them, and I shall regret them as long as I live. I am ready to do penance for

them and to make satisfaction as best I can.

Forgive me, O God, forgive me my sins through your holy name. Save my soul, which you have ransomed with your precious Blood. Look at me, Lord! I place myself at your mercy; I yield myself into your hands. Deal with me according to your goodness and not as my evil and crooked ways deserve.

I offer to you also all the good that I have done, however poor and flawed it may be. Transform it and make it holy that it may be pleasing in your sight and worthy of being offered to you. Continually draw me on to better things. Guide me, lazy and unworthy person that I am, to a blessed and praiseworthy end.

I offer you, too, all the holy desires of many devout people: the needs of my parents, friends, brothers, sisters and all of those who are dear to me. I offer you the needs of those who, for love of you, have helped either me or others, and I offer you the prayers and Masses that others have asked me to say for themselves and their loved ones, both living and dead. May they all feel your grace, your comfort, your protection from danger, and the freedom that you may grant them from pain. May they offer you joyful and generous thanks for hearing their prayers.

I also offer you my prayers and the sacrifice of this Mass, especially for those who have in some way offended, grieved, or insulted me or who have caused me any loss or hurt. Likewise, I offer my prayers for all those whom I have at one time or another grieved, troubled, injured, or shamed by what I said or did, knowingly or unknowingly. Forgive us our offenses, and forgive those who offend us.

O Lord, remove from our hearts all suspicion, indignation, anger and contention, and whatever else may harm charity and lessen brotherly love. Have mercy, Lord, on those who ask your mercy. Grant your grace to those without it, and help us to live that we might be worthy of it. Help us, Lord,

to continue on to eternal life. Amen.

Imitating Christ

1. Have you ever prayed as the disciple prays in this chapter? Have you ever come close to praying like it? Do you desire to pray in this manner? What would it take for you to make a total offering of self to Jesus? Is there anything holding you back? Can you identify it?
2. How often do you pray for others? Often? Once in a while? Hardly ever? Does intercessory prayer have an important role in your spiritual life? Should it? Do you see how uniting your sufferings with Christ's plays an intercessory role for those you pray for? For those you do not even know? For all of humanity?
3. Does it seem presumptuous to want to unite one's sufferings to Christ's? Why does God permit it? Does uniting our suffering with Christ's somehow extend his presence in the world? What does this mean concretely? Can you think of any examples?

Chapter Ten

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus instructs his disciple not to put off going to holy communion. Receiving Christ in the eucharist is one of the primary ways in which our unruly passions are calmed and our evil habits cured. We will always be able to find reasons to put off going to

communion. The longer we wait, however, the more difficult it will be to ready ourselves for it. Rather than allowing our anxieties, doubts, laziness, and indifference to dictate our reception of the sacraments, we should take quick action to assure our spiritual well-being. Not to do so is to play into the hands of the evil one, who does everything within his power to prevent us from making full use of the spiritual remedies at our disposal.

That Holy Communion Is Not to Be Lightly Omitted

Jesus:

You should have frequent recourse to the fountain of grace and divine mercy, to the fountain of goodness and perfect purity. Like a balm for your soul, Holy Communion will help you to overcome your weaknesses and bad habits, so that you may be stronger and more watchful against all the temptations and deceits of the devil. The enemy, knowing the goodness and great healing power of Holy Communion, constantly tries, with every means at his disposal, to get in the way and prevent the faithful and devout from receiving it. In fact, some people, while preparing themselves for Holy Communion, are subject to Satan's worst attacks. This wicked spirit, as it is written in Job, comes among the children of God to trouble them with his usual nasty behavior, bullying them and confusing them so as to lessen their devotion. By repeated attacks, he tries to undermine their faith so that they may either give up going to Communion altogether or receive it with little enthusiasm and devotion. Ignore his tricks and the pictures he paints in your mind, no matter how disgusting and horrid they may

be. Hurl all the foul images back on his head! The wretch is to be scorned and despised! You should not fail to go to Holy Communion because of his taunts or because of any fuss he causes.

Often some people are held back from going to Holy Communion because they feel that they are not devout enough or because of an excessive anxiety about going to confession. If this is your concern, follow the counsel of a wise person and put anxiety and scruple aside. Such concerns get in the way of God's grace and destroy any devout thoughts you may have.

Do not put off Holy Communion for any trivial qualm or small concern, but go quickly to confess it, and freely forgive all those who have offended you. If you have offended anyone, humbly ask forgiveness, and God will freely pardon you. What good does it do you to put off confession or to assign Communion to another day? Cleanse yourself right away. Spit out the poison quickly. Make haste to take the medicine and you will feel better than if you were to wait for a long time. If today you put aside Holy Communion for one reason, tomorrow may bring another more serious one, and so you may be kept from Communion for a long while, feeling less and less fit for it as the days go by. Get rid of this sloth and laziness as quickly as you can, for it does no good at all to linger in uneasiness and anxiety and to deprive yourself of the divine mysteries because of everyday obstacles. In fact, you do yourself even more harm by putting off Holy Communion for a long time, for it usually leads to serious apathy.

Sadly, some people who are indifferent and not firmly committed eagerly look for excuses for putting off confession. They simply want to postpone Holy Communion so that they will not have to keep a greater watch over themselves. Oh, what little love and feeble devotion they have who so easily put off Holy Communion! A person who lives his life as God wishes and who keeps his conscience

pure is pleasing to God and makes him happy. Such a person could receive Communion at every opportunity—and would want to—if he could do so without attracting too much attention. If a person sometimes abstains from Communion out of humility or because of some legitimate obstacle, he should be praised for his reverence. But if laziness steals over him, he must arouse himself and do all he can to shake it off. If he does, the Lord will help him, for he looks with special favor on our good intentions. When he is honestly prevented from Communion, however, let him always have a good will and the holy intention of sharing in the Body and Blood of Christ. In this way he will not miss the benefit of the Sacrament, for every day and every hour any devout person can freely share in an intimate fellowship with Christ. Nevertheless, on certain days and at appointed times he ought to receive sacramentally the Body of his Redeemer with loving reverence and seek the praise and honor of God more than his own spiritual comfort. As often as a person meditates on the mystery of Christ's Incarnation and Passion, so often does he communicate with him in a mystical way and so often is he refreshed by Christ and enflamed with love for him. On the other hand, a person who does not prepare himself unless a feast is at hand or because preparation is not his habit will often find himself unprepared.

Blessed is that person who offers himself as a sacrifice to the Lord whenever he celebrates Mass or receives Holy Communion. When celebrating Mass neither drag it out nor say it too fast. Celebrate it according to the common practice of those with whom you live. In celebrating Mass, you should not be a source of irritation or tedium to others, but you should stick to the ordinary ways common to your community. Seek to be helpful to others, rather than to indulge your own preferences.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you take your participation in the eucharist too lightly? Is it easy for you to find reasons for not going to Mass, for not receiving communion, for not going to confession when you need to? If so, were you always that way? Can you remember when you started to change? Do you wish to change now?
2. Have you ever been away from holy communion for a long time? If so, do you remember what the experience was like? How long were you away? How did it affect your life? What brought you back? What continues to keep you away?
3. Do you look upon the eucharist as a spiritual medicine, as something that will calm your unruly passions and root out your bad habits? Do you see it as an essential element of your growth in virtue and holiness? Is it something you cannot do without?

Chapter Eleven

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple speaks of the importance of being nurtured by the eucharist and by sacred doctrine, especially as it comes to us through sacred scripture. Upon these two tables are set the treasure of the Church's living tradition. When we partake of them, we are nourished by the living word and become more deeply incorporated into the body of Christ. Holy communion

imparts to us the wisdom of Christ's living body. That wisdom enables us to listen more deeply for the voice of the Lord in events of daily life. It enables us to rejoice with the saints for the many gifts God has bestowed on us. To listen to God's word and to feast on his body and blood are among the most important things we can do in life. Priests should take their ministry at the two tables seriously. With God's help, they can lead others into an even deeper appreciation of the Lord's banquet.

That the Body of Christ and the Holy Scriptures Are Most Necessary to the Faithful Soul

Disciple:

O sweet Lord Jesus, how great is the delight of a devout soul that feasts with you at your banquet where no other food is set before her but yourself, her only beloved. You are more to be wished for than all that her heart can desire. For me, it would be sweet to sit in your presence and weep tears of love from the very depth of my being and with the holy Magdalene wash your feet with them.

But where is this devotion? Where is this flood of holy tears? Surely, in your sight and in the sight of your holy angels, my whole heart should burn and weep for joy. You are truly present to me in the Sacrament, though hidden beneath a different form, for my eyes could not endure to see you in your own divine brightness nor could the whole world resist your splendor. In concealing yourself beneath the Sacrament you consider my weakness. I truly possess and

adore him whom the angels in heaven adore, but I see him only through the eyes of faith; they see him as he is, unveiled. I must be satisfied with the light of true faith and walk in it until the day when eternal light breaks through and shadowy figures pass away.

But when that which is perfect comes, the need for sacraments will end, for the blessed, who are in heavenly glory, do not need the medicine of the sacraments. They rejoice endlessly in God's presence, seeing his glory face to face, and being transformed from one degree of brightness into the brightness of the unfathomable deity, they taste the word of God made flesh, as he was in the beginning, as he is now, and as he ever shall be.

The thought of these wonders makes even spiritual comforts seem wearisome to me, for as long as I cannot clearly see my Lord in his glory, all else that I see or hear means nothing to me. You are my witness, O God, that nothing can comfort me, that nothing can bring me rest, but you, my God, whom I wish to contemplate for all of eternity.

But this is not possible yet. I must strive, then, to achieve great patience and to keep you always foremost in my mind. Your saints, Lord, who now rejoice with you in the kingdom of heaven, waited in faith and great patience for you. What they believed, I believe. What they hoped for, I hope for. Where they have arrived, I, by your grace, also hope to arrive. In the meantime, I shall walk in faith, comforted by the examples of the saints. I shall have holy books, too, for comfort and to mirror life. Beyond all these, I shall have your most holy Body for my sole remedy and refuge.

I firmly believe that two things are utterly essential for me in this life; without them this journey would be unbearable to me: They are food and light. So, in my weakness you have given me your holy Body for refreshing my mind and body, and you have given me your word as a lantern for my feet. Without these two things I could not do a very good job of

living; God's word is the light of my soul, and your Sacrament is the bread of life.

These may also be called two tables placed on either side of the treasury of holy church. One table is the holy altar, having the holy bread, that is, the precious Body of Christ. The other table is the divine law, containing holy teachings that show us the correct interpretation of faith and lead us onward through the inner veil into the Holy of Holies.

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus, light of eternal light, for the table of sacred teaching, which you have given to us through your servants, the prophets, apostles and other teachers. Thanks be to you, Creator and Redeemer of us all, who, to declare your love to the whole world, have prepared a great supper in which you have set before us not a figurative lamb, but your most sacred Body and Blood. By preparing this sacred banquet, you bring joy to all the faithful, filling them with the cup of salvation, which contains all the delights of paradise. The holy angels feast with us too, and their happiness is even greater than ours.

Oh, how great and honorable is the office of priests! They have been given the ability to consecrate, with sacred words, the Lord of majesty, to bless him with their lips, to hold him with their hands, to receive him with their own mouths, and to give him to others. Oh, how clean those hands should be, how pure the mouth, how holy the body, how spotless the heart of a priest, to whom so often enters the author of purity. From the mouth of a priest, who so often receives the Sacrament of Christ, should come not a word that is not holy, upright, and helpful. Since he is accustomed to look upon the Body of Christ, his eyes should be simple and modest. The hands that touch the creator of heaven and earth should be pure and lifted up to heaven. What is said in the Law is meant especially for priests: "Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy."

Almighty God, by your grace help us, we who have

undertaken the priestly office, that we may be able to serve you worthily, devoutly and with all purity and good conscience. If we are unable to live in such innocence as we should, grant us the grace to weep for the wrongs we have done and, in a spirit of humility and resolve, grant that we may serve you with greater zeal as we journey through life.

Imitating Christ

1. Are you attentive at Mass when the liturgy of the word is being celebrated? Do you pay special attention to the readings? Do you ponder their meaning for your life? Do you listen actively to the priest's homily? Do you reflect on what he says?
2. Do you truly celebrate the banquet of the Lord? Do you actively join in the thanksgiving the Church offers to the Father through Christ and in the Spirit? When you do so, do you feel connected with the communion of saints? With those who have died? With all believers? With all men, women, and children of good will? What could you do to help you to participate more fully in the feast of the holy eucharist?
3. What is the connection between the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the eucharist? Are they two separate celebrations or intimate aspects of the one saving mystery? What is their relation to your own spiritual life? Do you appreciate one more than the other? Do you take one for granted? Are both equally important?

Chapter Twelve

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus tells his disciple of the importance of preparing oneself for receiving holy communion. When we invite a guest to our home, we make sure to clean it up and have everything in order before he or she arrives. We must do the same for Jesus when he comes into our hearts. Although we can do nothing to make ourselves worthy of so great a gift, we must still do our best to offer him what we can. Even though we are poor and undeserving, we must offer him our best hospitality. To do so, it is important that we cleanse our hearts and open them to the Lord so that the gentle breeze of the Spirit can blow through them. Even after we receive the body and blood of our Lord, we should continue to open our hearts to him through heartfelt prayers and fervent petitions.

That Receiving Christ in Holy Communion Requires Preparation

Jesus:

I am the lover of purity and the giver of all holiness. I seek a pure heart, and there I shall rest. Prepare a large, furnished upper room for me, and I shall celebrate my resurrection with you and my disciples. If you want me to come and stay with you, clear away the old yeast and clean up that place in your heart where you live. For a time, shut out the world and all its confusion and noise; sit like a sparrow alone on a

housetop, and in the sorrow of your soul, think of the many times that you have turned your back on God and have gone your own way.

Every lover prepares the best and most beautiful room in the house for his beloved, for in this way he shows his affection for the one he loves. Understand, though, that you cannot properly prepare yourself by your own efforts no matter how worthy they may be, even if you were to spend an entire year trying, and even if you were to think of nothing else! It is only out of my goodness and grace that you are allowed to approach my table. It is as if a beggar were invited to dinner by a very rich person and he had nothing to give in return for the kindness except humility and thanks.

Do what you can and do it attentively, not out of habit or because you feel that you must. Instead, prepare yourself with deep awe, profound reverence and unutterable love to receive the Body of your Lord God who sees fit to come to you. It is I who have called you, I who have wished it to be done. I shall provide what is lacking in you. Come and receive me.

When I give you the grace of devotion give thanks to your God. I give it to you not because you deserve it, but because I have been merciful toward you. If you do not have this grace but instead feel yourself to be dry, keep on praying, sighing and knocking at my door. Do not give up until you are made worthy of receiving some crumb or drop of saving grace. You need me; I do not need you. You do not make me holy, but I come to make you holy and to make you a better person. You come to be made holy by me and to be made one with me, to receive new grace, and to renew your resolve to change your life. Do not neglect this grace, but prepare your heart with all diligence, and welcome your beloved to share it with you.

You must not only devoutly prepare yourself before Communion, but you should also take great care to stay in a

devout state after receiving the Sacrament. Vigilance is no less required after Communion than devout preparation is required before. Keeping a close watch on yourself after receiving Communion is the best preparation for gaining even greater grace in the future. If you immediately turn your mind from God to your own affairs after Communion, you will find yourself all the more unprepared to receive God's grace. Stay quiet. Live calmly in the secret recesses of your heart and enjoy your God, for you have him, and the whole world cannot take him away from you. I am the one to whom you should give your entire being, so that freed from all care, you no longer live for yourself, but for me.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you look forward to receiving communion? Do you prepare your heart? Do you think you are receiving a special guest? How do you prepare your heart? Can you think of anything more you should do? What is holding you back from doing it?
2. Have you ever examined your true motivations for preparing your heart to receive communion? Are your motivations mixed? Can you identify them? Do you realize that all that you do to prepare yourself to receive communion in no way makes you worthy in the eyes of God?
3. Do you normally do anything special *after* receiving communion? Do you sit in silence? If so, for how long? Do you keep watch over your heart? How so? Do you thank the Lord for what you have received? Do you make any special petitions? Do you ask him to watch over you? Do you ask him to watch over any

others?

Chapter Thirteen

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple speaks of his desire to be united with Jesus. To live in communion with Jesus should be our hearts' deepest desire. We are all called to a deep, personal relationship with him. Nothing else matters. To live in such an intimate union, we need to open our hearts and converse with him. Such a conversation can take place, however, only if we are in touch with our weaknesses and place them before the Lord in humility and truth. If we pretend to be something that we are not, the Lord will not enter into intimate conversation with us. If we come to him with pure and humble hearts, he will come to us, acknowledge us as his friends, and dwell within us.

That a Devout Soul Should Wish Wholeheartedly to Be United with Christ in the Sacrament

Disciple:

Who will allow me to be alone with you, Lord, to open my whole heart to you, and to enjoy you as my soul desires? Let no one think little of me nor anyone disturb or concern me. You alone speak to me and I to you, as a lover speaks to a

loved one and as a friend shares a meal with a friend. This I pray for and this I desire: that I may be totally united to you, and that you may fill my entire heart. May I increasingly acquire a taste for heavenly and eternal things by receiving Holy Communion and by frequently celebrating Mass.

O Lord God, when will I be wholly united to you, completely absorbed in you, and totally forgetful of myself? You in me, and I in you! Grant that we may remain together forever! Truly, you are my beloved, chosen from among thousands. My soul is pleased to dwell with you all the days of her life. Truly, you are the source of my peace. Supreme peace and true rest lie in you, and outside of you there is only toil, sorrow and endless misery. Truly, you are the hidden God. You have nothing to do with the wicked, but you speak to those who are humble and simple. Oh, how sweet is your spirit, Lord. To show your sweetness toward your children, you saw fit to refresh them with the most sweet bread that comes down from heaven. Truly, there is no other nation so great, no other nation so intimate with its gods, as you, our God, are intimate with us. For our daily comfort you raise our hearts to heaven, and you give yourself to be eaten and enjoyed.

What people are so highly favored as those whom you love? Or what creature under heaven is so beloved as the devout soul to whom you come and feed with your glorious Body? O inexpressible grace! O admirable graciousness! O boundless love, bestowed on the entire human family!

What can I give back to the Lord for this grace and for his great love? There is nothing I can give that is more acceptable than to offer my whole heart to my God and to join myself intimately to him. When my soul is perfectly at one with God, then I shall rejoice from the very depths of my being. Then he will say to me: "If you want to be with me, then I want to be with you." And I shall answer him: "See fit, Lord, to remain with me. I shall gladly stay with you." That my heart be united with you is my one and only

desire.

Imitating Christ

1. How much do you desire to be united with Christ? Is it the primary goal of your life? A secondary goal? Do you think about Jesus often? Do you talk to him often? If so, what do you talk to him about?
2. Do you have an intimate relationship with the Lord? How would you describe it? What is it based on? Is anything getting in the way of it? How could it be more intimate?
3. How does the Lord speak to you? As a friend? A lover? A brother or sister? A mixture of these or other images? How do you speak to Lord? Do you have a particular image that describes your relationship with him? Have you ever shared that image with others? Have you ever shared that image with the Lord?

Chapter Fourteen

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple speaks of his holy longing for Christ in the eucharist. Just as the hearts of the disciple at Emmaus burned within them as Jesus walked beside them, explained the scriptures, and then broke bread with them, so do our hearts long to be with the risen Lord. Through the eucharist, Christ does not only walk beside us. He also dwells within our hearts and

makes us one with him. His steps becomes our steps; our steps, his. Each time we receive the eucharist, Jesus comes to us anew and deepens our desire to walk in him. He asks in return only that we allow the holy longing within us to be filled by the holy longing he has for us.

Disciple:

Oh, how great and abundant is your sweetness, Lord, which you have reserved for those who love you as they should! When I call to mind some devout people who approach your Sacrament with such great devotion and love, Lord, I burn with shame that I approach your altar and the table of Holy Communion so cold and indifferent. Why do I remain so dry and have so little love in my heart? Why am I not burning with love in your presence, my God? Why am I not as strongly drawn to you and as profoundly affected as many of those who love you are? Because of their overwhelming desire for Communion and the tenderness of their hearts they cannot hold back their tears! With their entire beings they long for you from their very depths, O God, fountain of life. They are unable to satisfy their hunger in any other way except by receiving your Body with all delight and spiritual longing.

O true, burning faith of theirs! It serves as an argument to prove your sacred presence! They truly know their Lord in the breaking of the bread. Their hearts burn so strongly in them because Jesus walks with them. Such affection and devotion, such overpowering love and passion, are often beyond me.

O good, sweet and merciful Jesus, be merciful to me, and let me feel, at least sometimes, a little of that same heartfelt love for you when I receive Holy Communion. If you do, my faith will be strengthened more, my hope in your goodness will be increased, and my love, set on fire by having tasted

the heavenly food, will never fail. Your mercy is so powerful that it can give me the grace I desire. Whenever you like you can grant me this gift. Although I do not burn with such great passion as those who are especially devout, yet, by your grace, I wish to have that same intense and burning desire as they have. I hope and pray that I may be counted among your devout lovers and be numbered in their holy company.

Imitating Christ

1. Has your heart ever burned for the Lord? If so, has it happened to you often? How would you describe the experience? Is it in any way connected with the breaking of the bread?
2. Do you believe that God longs for you? Do you believe that your holy longing for God is nothing but a faint reflection of his deep, holy longing for you? Have you ever experienced this holy longing of God?
3. In what way is the eucharist itself a sign of God's holy longing? Have you ever thought of it in this way? Does it make sense to you? Does looking at it in this way cast a new light for you on the meaning of the sacrament?

Chapter Fifteen

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus speaks of the gift of true devotion. We must seek this grace with all our hearts. True devotion enkindles in us a desire to love the Lord

with every ounce of our beings. To receive it, we must humbly turn to God in prayer and patiently await its coming. God alone decides how and when to dispense his graces. All we can do is turn to him and ask him to light a fire within our hearts. As we wait for its coming, we must confess our sins to the Lord and ask him to rid us of all inordinate thoughts and desires. In this way, we can be sure that the Lord will pour his blessing into the empty vessels of our hearts. When we have true devotion, the eucharist becomes for us the great means of salvation. Through it, union with God moves from the realm of possibility to concrete reality.

That the Grace of Devotion Is Gained by Humility

Jesus:

You should seek persistently the grace of devotion, ask for it earnestly, look for it patiently and confidently, accept it thankfully, hold on to it humbly, use it with care, and leave the time and manner of this heavenly visit to God until he comes to join you. Above all, when you feel little or no inner devotion, you should feel great humility, but not to the point where you become overly dejected or too sad. God often gives in a flash what he has held back for a long time. He sometimes gives at the end of prayer what he delayed giving at the beginning.

If grace were always given at once and were yours for the asking, human weakness could not deal with it. So you must wait for the grace of devotion with firm hope and with

humble patience. When it is not given to you or when it is mysteriously taken away, blame yourself and your sins. Sometimes it is a little thing that hinders grace or keeps it hidden from you—if, indeed, that may be called little and not great which keeps such a great good from you. But if you remove the obstacle—small or large—and fully overcome it, you will get what you ask. As soon as you yield yourself to God with your whole heart, not seeking this or that for your own pleasure or will but placing yourself entirely in his hands, you will find yourself quickly at one with God and at peace. Nothing will give you greater happiness or please you so much as being obedient to the divine will.

Therefore, if you lift up your mind to God with a singleness of heart and if you empty yourself of all that is not God, you will become fit to receive his grace and to live a life of love and devotion. The Lord gives this blessing where he finds the vessel empty. So, the more completely you pour out your self-centeredness and the demands that it makes upon you, and the more completely you become empty and wholly dependent on God's love, the more quickly will grace come to you. When at last you can place yourself in God's hands without any reservations, your heart will overflow with joy and wonder, knowing that the Lord is with you, both now and forever.

So, there you have it! The person who seeks God with his whole heart shall be blessed; he does not have a soul for nothing. In receiving the Holy Eucharist, such a person wins the great grace of divine union because he does not focus on his own devotion and comfort, but goes beyond all devotion and comfort and seeks the glory and honor of God.

Imitating Christ

1. What are the characteristics of true devotion? Can you draw up a list? Do you know anyone who displays

- these characteristics? Do you? What concrete steps can you take to become more fervent in your spiritual life?
2. Have you ever experienced dry periods in your life, where it was particularly difficult to offer yourself to God with all your heart? How did you deal with those periods? Did you share them with anyone? Did you share them with God? Did you ask for his help?
 3. How would you characterize your devotion to the eucharist? Is it fervent? Hot and cold? Dry? Do you look upon the eucharist as a means of salvation? Do you see it as a way of bringing you into communion with Christ and his body, the church?

Chapter Sixteen

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple speaks to the Lord of his needs and asks for the graces needed to live a holy life. We should never be afraid to bring our needs to the Lord. Even though he already knows them (even better than ourselves), nothing can take the place of our own words and heartfelt petitions. Bringing our needs to the Lord and asking for the graces we need to grow in virtue and holiness is a sign of the trust we place in God. If we did not believe our prayers would be heard and answered, we would never bother to bring our needs to the Lord. We do so because we have confidence that he hears our prayers

and will provide for us as a father does for his children. We may not always get exactly what we ask for, but we always get what we need for our spiritual growth.

That We Should Make Our Needs Known to Christ and Ask for His Help

Disciple:

O most sweet and loving Lord, whom I now devoutly wish to receive, you know my weaknesses and my needs. You know how many bad habits and vices I have. You know how often I am burdened, tempted, shaken and stained by sin. I come to you for healing. I pray to you for comfort and support. I speak to you, who know all things, to whom all my inmost thoughts are evident. You alone can adequately comfort me and help me. You know what good things I need most, and you know how poor I am in virtue.

Look! I stand before you poor and naked, asking your grace and imploring your mercy. Feed me, for I am hungry. Inflame my coldness with the fire of your love. Illuminate my blindness with the light of your presence. Turn my eyes from all that is not you; turn all oppression into patience. Make all that leads me from you not worth thinking about. Make me forget it all. Lift up my heart to you in heaven, and let me not wander aimlessly about the world. From now on, you will be my only delight, for you alone are my food and drink, my love and joy, my sweetness and my whole good.

Oh, that by your presence you would set me fully on fire, totally consume me and transform me into you, so that through the grace of inner union and by melting in love's flames I would become one spirit with you. Do not leave me hungry and thirsty, but treat me mercifully as you have so often and so admirably treated your saints. How wonderful it

would be if I were burned and wholly consumed for you,
since you are a fire always burning and never consumed, a
love that purifies the heart and enlightens the mind.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you bring your needs to the Lord? If not, why not? If so, do you bring all of them? Only some of them? Only those you think you might have a chance getting from him? Is there anything holding you back from sharing all of your needs with the Lord?
2. Do you bring your material as well as emotional, intellectual, community, and spiritual needs to the Lord? Do you see any connections among these various needs? Do you think the Lord might see some connections?
3. After you share your various needs with the Lord, do you always end by saying, “May your will, not my will be done?” If so, how does this phrase change the nature and tone of your prayer? If not, what holds you back from praying in this way? Are you afraid of what the Lord’s will for you might be?

Chapter Seventeen

Introduction

In this chapter, the disciple proclaims his deep love for Lord in the eucharist. He offers his entire heart to Jesus and tells of his desire to follow the example of the

many holy men and women of the past. We too should tell the Lord of our deep desire for holiness. Like Mary, who proclaimed the greatness of the Lord in her humble *fiat*, and like John the Baptist, who leapt for joy in his mother's womb at the coming of the Lord, we too should sing the praises of Jesus, our Lord and Savior. One of the best ways for us to do this is to participate in the church's eucharistic celebration with fervent love and devotion. The eucharist is the sacrament of Christian holiness. As we approach the altar of the Lord, we have good reason to leap for joy and sing his praises. If we offer our hearts to the Lord in this sacrament, he promises to draw them deep into his own and gradually transform them.

Of Burning Love and the Strong Desire to Receive Christ

Disciple:

O Lord, I long to receive you with deep devotion and burning love, with all the affection and fervor of my heart. Just as many saints and devout persons, who were especially pleasing to you because of their holy lives and ardent devotion, longed to receive you in Holy Communion, so do I long to receive you, too. O my God, eternal Love, my entire good and endless happiness, I wish to receive you with the same burning desire and profound reverence that any of the saints ever had or ever could have felt.

Although I am not worthy to have these devout feelings, nevertheless, I give all the affection of my heart to you, as if

I were the only one who had all these pleasing and burning desires. In fact, whatever a pious mind can think of and desire, all this I present and offer to you with the greatest reverence and deepest love. I do not want to hold anything back for myself. I want to sacrifice myself and all that is mine freely and deliberately to you.

O Lord, my God, my Creator and my Redeemer, I wish to receive you today with the same tenderness, reverence, praise and honor; with the same thankfulness, dignity, and affection; with the same faith, hope, and unblemished love as your most holy mother, the glorious Virgin Mary. Let me receive you as she did, when the angel announced to her the mystery of your Incarnation and she humbly and devoutly replied: "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word."

As your blessed precursor, John the Baptist, rejoiced in your presence and leaped with the joy of the Holy Spirit while he was still in his mother's womb, let me also be enflamed with an intense and holy desire for you. And as when he saw Jesus walking among us, let me say with equal love and humility: "The bridegroom's friend, who stands and hears him, rejoices with gladness at his voice." Like John the Baptist, the most excellent among your saints, let me offer myself to you with all my heart.

I bring to you the joy of all devout hearts, their burning love, soaring thoughts, divine insights and heavenly visions. I place before you all the virtues and praises that have been or ever will be given to you by all the creatures of heaven and earth. I do this for myself and for all those who have been commended to me in prayer, so that by every one of them you may be praised and glorified forever and ever.

Accept my vows, O Lord, my God, and my desires of giving you unending praise and endless blessing, which are due to you because of your exceeding greatness. This I give to you and wish to give to you every day and every moment. I

invite and ask all the heavenly spirits and all the faithful to join me in offering you thanks and praise.

Let all peoples, nations and languages, with great joy and deep devotion, praise you and magnify your holy and sweet name. Let all those who with reverence and devotion celebrate your most high Sacrament and receive it with full faith, deserve to find grace and mercy before you, and may they humbly pray for me, a sinner. And after they have won the grace of devotion and the reward of being at one with you, and after they have left the heavenly table full of comfort and wondrously refreshed, may they see fit to remember poor me.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you have a fervent love for the eucharist? Do you look upon it as a sacrament of holiness? What are the qualities of holiness? How does it manifest itself in a person's life? How does it express itself in your life? How do you still need to grow in holiness?
2. In your opinion, which saints best exemplify your understanding of a life completely transformed by the love of God? What makes you say this? Are the qualities of holiness always the same? Do they manifest themselves in people's lives in different ways?
3. Do you believe that you are called to become a saint? If so, how has this call manifested itself in your life? How far along are you? What do you still need to change? How is your call to holiness related to the eucharist? How does participating in this sacrament

help you to grow in holiness? Can you be specific?

Chapter Eighteen

Introduction

In this chapter, Jesus tells his disciple of the unfathomable nature of the eucharist. The secrets of the divine mysteries cannot be completely understood by human reason. For this reason, we must be careful not to allow idle curiosity to lead us into areas that we will never be able to understand. Any attempts to deepen our understanding of the eucharist should be coupled with reverence for the sacrament, humility concerning our own intellectual capacities, and deep respect for the teachings of the fathers. If it is impossible for any of us to have a comprehensive understanding of human knowledge, what makes us think that we can have such with respect to divine knowledge? It would be much better for us to walk the way of the Lord with simplicity of heart and respect for his commandments. If we walk in the light of faith, the Lord will reveal his wisdom to us and show us all that is necessary for our salvation.

That We Should Not Pry into This Sacrament Out of Curiosity

Jesus:

You should guard against curious and useless prying into this most profound Sacrament if you do not want to sink into an abyss of doubt. The person who probes into majesty will be overwhelmed by its glory. God can do more than you can understand. A pious and humble inquiry into truth is all right as long as you are always willing to be taught and to walk in the sound teachings of the Fathers. Blessed is that simplicity that leaves the difficult paths of questioning and walks along the plain and firm road of God's commandments. Many people have lost all feeling of devotion because they wanted to pry into profound things. It is faith and a genuine, honest life that is required of you, not a lofty intellect nor a deep understanding of God's mysteries. If you do not understand or fully grasp those things that are below you, how will you comprehend those that are above you? So, submit yourself to God and rely on your faith, and you will receive all the knowledge that you need.

Some people are horribly tempted about the faith and this Sacrament. It is not their fault, but the devil's. Pay no attention to such temptations, and do not argue with your thoughts or try to answer the doubts that the devil whispers in your ear. Instead, believe in God's words and believe his saints and prophets, and the wicked enemy will turn tail and run. It will often do you much good to suffer such doubts. The devil does not tempt unbelievers and sinners; he surely possesses them already. It is the faithful and devout whom he tempts and molests, and he does it in a variety of ways.

So, continue on in your simple and staunch faith and come to the Sacrament with humble reverence and securely commit to almighty God all that you cannot understand. God does not mislead you, but a person is lost who places too much trust in himself. God walks with simple people and reveals himself to those who are humble. He gives understanding to the little ones and opens the minds of the pure; he hides his grace from the curious and the arrogant.

Human reason is weak and can be misled; true faith, on the

other hand, cannot be fooled. All reasoning and natural inquiry should follow faith, not precede it or weaken it. In this most holy and most excellent Sacrament, faith and love excel, and they work in hidden ways. God—eternal, boundless, and of infinite power—does great things in heaven and on earth that are a complete mystery to us. There is no searching out his wondrous works. If God’s works were such that human reason could easily figure them out, they could not be said to be wonderful, nor would they be far too marvelous for words to express.

Imitating Christ

1. Do you believe that there are some things that human reason will never be able to fully comprehend? If so, why? What is the difference between the light of reason and the light of faith? Do they share any similarities? How do they relate to each other?
2. Have you ever met someone who thinks he or she knows everything there is to know about the eucharist? Have *you* ever been that way? Why is it presumptuous to think that way of the divine mysteries? What dangers lie in such an attitude? How can they be corrected?
3. Does walking in faith with simplicity of heart mean that you should never ask questions about what you believe? What role does “faith seeking understanding” (the classical definition of theology) play in your life? How do you know when such a search has gone too far?

Epilogue

The Imitation of Christ is one of the great classics of western spirituality. Its claim to this title comes not because it has been so widely read or because it possesses the same literary freshness as when it was first composed, or because its spiritual message has the same relevance and immediacy for us today as it did more than five centuries ago. If these were the criteria for judging its greatness, it would have been relegated long ago to the waste bin of unwanted (and largely unread) spiritual treatises. Its claim to this title comes from something far more basic: its capacity to deepen in its readers their desire for an intimate friendship with Christ.

The author of *The Imitation* puts us in touch with the great themes of the gospel message. He does so by providing us with a series of meditations aimed at leading us along the various stages of spiritual growth to a face-to-face encounter with the person of Jesus Christ. These simple meditations provide us with guidelines for our own spiritual journey. They do so by outlining the various dimensions of the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways and by integrating them into the dynamic process of conversion that leads us away from self-

centeredness to lives dedicated totally to God. As the source and summit of the Christian life, the eucharist plays an integral role in this gradual process of transformation. Why else would believers throughout the centuries receive it with such devotion and refer to it with such a revered title as “The Blessed Sacrament?”

Every great spiritual classic needs to be interpreted anew for each generation. *The Imitation of Christ* is no exception. Although much of its spirituality is inexorably tied to the historical and religious climate from which it sprang, its basic message continues to attract those who take the time to peer beneath its glossy, late-medieval veneer. The purpose of this “text and reader’s guide arrangement” has been to provide today’s reader with some helpful tools with which to distinguish the work’s perennial gospel themes from those that are more culturally and historically conditioned. It is hoped that the historical background, the interpretative filters, the introductory comments, and the closing reflection questions to each chapter have helped to make the important message of *The Imitation* more accessible to these readers. It is also hoped that its pages have helped them to examine the contours of their own beliefs about the meaning of Christian discipleship and raise some relevant questions about how it should be presented (and implemented) at the dawn of the new millennium.

In the final analysis, *The Imitation of Christ* is all about deepening one's relationship with Christ. If this volume has helped some of its readers to know and love Jesus more intimately, then the effort gone into producing it was well worth the while. To imitate Christ means to follow in the footsteps of the Lord. Reading this book, it is hoped, has been for the reader a strong step forward in that direction.

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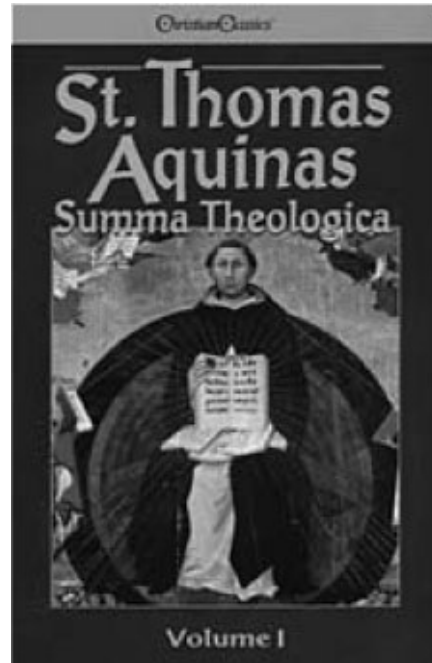
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