

# A Retreat in Union with the Heart of Christ

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## MAKING A RETREAT

A retreat is a special time alone with God. We put aside other concerns for some days and spend several hours a day in prayerful reflection in the presence of God. It gives us a chance to change directions or, if we're on the right track, to go ahead more confidently. We're fortunate if we have a retreat director to guide us, but that may not be possible. At least we should have a spiritual director to talk with from time to time.

There are 24 meditations here along with some optional readings, so a person could make either an 8-day retreat with three meditations a day, or a 6-day retreat with four meditations each day. Each meditation is broken into two or three parts, although the text is continuous. You are encouraged not to read the text, but to reflect prayerfully on it, phrase by phrase or sentence by sentence, and even to return in prayer to those parts where God has touched you most strongly.

After each meditation, spend a short time reviewing it to see where you could have done better. You should note down any special inspirations God has given you.

Each meditation would normally be for one hour, but you can adapt this to your situation. You may even wish to extend this retreat over a longer period, but take care to preserve its unity. It has a structure that should lead to a goal that becomes clear as you advance through the meditations.

This retreat will concentrate on growing in love for Jesus Christ. You should have a Bible handy, or at least a New Testament. You may want to read from the *Imitation of Christ*. It would be useful to have a copy of Pius XII's encyclical letter *Haurietis Aquas* (1956) on devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Perhaps you've never made a retreat before. You wonder how you should prepare for it. Have you got a quiet place? Are you rested? Then start. Don't put it off, waiting for the perfect time and place. Start soon. Perhaps today.

You start by putting this entire effort in God's hands. Say: "You've invited me, Lord, to make this retreat. Help me. I don't rely on my own efforts. I depend on you. Lead me."

*(Note: All scripture quotations are taken from The New American Bible, New York: Benziger, 1970)*

## 1. GETTING STARTED

1. Of his fullness. Read the Prologue to the first chapter of St. John's gospel (1/1-17). Read it out loud, to yourself, slowly. It ends: "Of his fullness we have all had a share—love following upon love"(1/16).

John has just told us about God's kindness in sending Jesus Christ into the world. What a benefit for us all! That's the fullness he's talking about. Read this section through again, so you can hear it from your own lips. Stop wherever you want. Repeat a word or a phrase. Reflect on it. Let it sink in. Don't rush.

2. Prayerful reflection. When we meditate, we're reflecting prayerfully in God's presence. We use some small passage from the Scripture (Old or New Testament, usually the New), read it through slowly, stopping to talk to God about it. It's important to realize you're in God's presence. You and he are together. He is really there with you. Let that sink in each time at the start of your prayer. You can't really talk to him if you're not aware of his presence.

Let's go back to what you read. John says "In the beginning," but he really means "from all eternity." Before time began there was only God. God had determined, out of his great kindness and love, to share his being with others—with angels and with man. Through his Word, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, he created the entire universe, and he created man in his image and likeness:

God created man in his image;  
in the divine image he created him;  
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1/27)

In time, he sent John the Baptist to prepare people to welcome the Saviour. In Christ, the second Person of the Trinity came into the world as man, but he was not accepted. Some, however, did accept him, and these God adopted as his sons and daughters, welcoming them into his family. (cf. Jn 1/12; Galatians 4/5-6) John the Evangelist tells us this entire plan of God is a work of his undying love for us: "Of his fullness we have all had a share—love following upon love." (Jn 1/16)

3. Seeking understanding. As you prayed over this passage, you probably stopped to ask God certain questions. For example: Why did you decide to share your being with others? Why didn't people accept Christ? Do people who accept Christ and are baptised know that they are adopted into God's family? When I associate with other people, why don't I recognize them as my brothers and sisters in God's family? What is meant by this fullness we have received?

If you did ask God some questions, I hope you didn't rush, that you waited for an answer. We make a great mistake in prayer when we do all the talking—not giving God a chance to speak to our mind and heart.

Why not read this passage again, slowly, out loud? Stop to ask a question or to reflect on what something means. Give God a chance to respond. At the end, spend a few minutes talking with God quietly. Ask him to continue to lead you to Jesus. You can close by saying the Our Father.

## 2. FILLED WITH WONDER

*Note: Always begin your prayer (a) by stopping to realize you're in God's presence, and (b) by offering your prayer to his honour and glory.*

1. A magnificent world. Read Psalm 8. It begins: "O Lord, our Lord, how glorious is your name over all the earth!" In your imagination, see the wonderful blue sphere of earth photographed by earth-circling astronauts. Then move out to the planets: Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus and the rest, and look at the brilliant sun in whose orbit this galaxy revolves in perfect alignment. Or look up at the starry sky at night and imagine the vastness of the heavens. It would take us four years traveling at the speed of light (186,000 miles, or 300,000 km, per second!) to reach the nearest star.

Realize that you are in the presence of God. He made this immense universe filled with power and glory, by a mere act of his will, and he constantly keeps it in being and good order. Are you filled with wonder at God's power and greatness? Tell him so. Why not thank him for this magnificent act of creation? Are you filled with awe and praise? Say it. Do you realize how little you are in his presence? Why has he made this vast universe that we can never comprehend? Is it because, however wonderful his creation, it is always only an infinitesimal reflection of his greatness?

2. Called me from my mother's womb. Now turn to the workings of your own body. If you have good health, bless God. Even if you experience physical problems, you know that you are a marvel of God's wisdom. Take just the heart and the circulation of blood: so effortless, so dynamic, so critical for the smooth operation of your entire body. Praise God for his power and wisdom. . . . Now go outside yourself and look at the wonder of procreation: two persons joined together to beget new life, into which God breathes a human soul; and it grows so wonderfully according to God's plan. Truly, as the psalmist says, God knew me in my mother's womb; and he watched over me as I grew to maturity. Why not read the whole of Psalm 139? One passage runs:

Truly you have formed my inmost being;  
You knit me in my mother's womb  
I give you thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made;  
Wonderful are your works. (Ps 139/13-14)

3. He wanted me. When I reflect on God's wisdom and his care for me, what words can express how I feel? Again, I am filled with wonder and I say that to God. But I am also filled with gratitude because I know that he has loved me personally. Did you not choose to create me, Lord? You could easily have created others, left me out of your plan. But you wanted me, and you have kept me safe all these years. You hold me in the palm of your hand. Why? There is, I know, just one reason: because you love me. Convince me of your love, Lord. Make this conviction the dominant inspiration in my life, now and for years to come.

### 3. HOME OF THE TRINITY

1. Dwelling in me. You made me, Father, because you loved me, and you wanted me to share in your life. Not only did you give me life in my mother's womb and brought me into the world. Most wonderful of all, you came to me in baptism and made your home in me. You live in me. I am struck with awe every time I think of it. You, the most blessed Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—have come to dwell in me. And I know you are here to protect me from danger, especially from temptation, and to form me in the likeness of your Son Jesus. I am astounded at what you have done. Thank you, Lord.

2. Active in my spirit. I know that in your infinite kindness you, as the Trinity, are continually active in me—what wonderful activity: the Father begetting the Son in the fullness of his being and the Holy Spirit proceeding as third Person from the love of the Father and Son. This action constantly takes place within the Trinity. It is the noblest, most holy, most dynamic activity in all reality, and it is taking place right within my spirit!

What can I say, Lord, when I realize how wonderfully Christ has fulfilled his promise in me:

Anyone who loves me will be true to my word,  
and my Father will love him;  
we will come to him and make our dwelling place with him. ...  
I will ask the Father and he will give you another Paraclete—  
to be with you always: the Spirit of truth .... (John 14/23 and 16)

You have come to me—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and you are totally active within me. I adore you, Lord, and I stand in wonder at this activity of yours. Give me a profound sense of your holiness, so I can realize how unworthy I am to be here in your presence.

3. Unbounded love. I am amazed, Lord, at your goodness, at the love you have shown for me. Christ told us that love drove him to lay down his life for his friends, and that he regards us as these friends. (John 15/13-14) But to come to live within me, and for the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to be fully active here, this is more than I could ever have expected.

What is this precious gift, Lord--your love for me? Love like this is too much to expect, too difficult to comprehend. Has your love no limits? Help me to understand the extraordinary kindness of your love for me from all eternity.

### 4. SINNERS RECLAIMED BY HIS MERCY

1. Going our own way. You created us, Lord, because you loved us and you wanted us to love you and serve you in return. You gave us great personal powers—you made us in your own image and likeness—and you gave us all the goods of the earth. But you also gave us free will, and we could use this for good or for evil. We chose to use our freedom in going against you.

Adam and Eve rejected your command and started us on the road to destruction. Over many centuries, our forefathers found many ways to abuse your gifts and cater to their baser instincts and desires. We spurned your love, rejected your affection, and substituted for it a shallow fascination with creatures. We refused the living waters and chose to drink from a shabby pool of putrid delights.

Lord, what had we done? Where did we go wrong? Did you make a mistake in giving us the power to choose freely? Did we know what we were doing in rejecting your overwhelming kindness? Is the attraction of sin so powerful that we fell into it almost without thinking? How did we let ourselves be deceived by some flimsy allurements?

For whatever reason, I know I failed. I cast aside your hand outstretched lovingly. I turned my back on you and went my own way. How could I be so foolish? I threw your kindness back at you and turned away from the gaze of Christ begging for my loyalty.

2. He hasn't forsaken us. Now that I have rejected your loving kindness, Father, what is left for me? Am I doomed to wander forever, an outcast like Cain (Gen 4/12), rejected like Adam and Eve? (Gen 3/23)

We all have turned our backs on God—both individually and collectively, but God in his infinite kindness has not turned away from us. It is as if he understood all along that we were weak and prone to falling. He reaches out his hand again and says: Come! You have been foolish. Come back, I will forgive you. I have never stopped loving you.

And so, our Father has pity on us, the children of his fondest hopes, and he sends his Son Jesus to reinstate us in his love, if we will accept him. Is the Father's love powerful enough to move us to return to him? Will we continue wandering aimlessly in pride and confusion? "He came unto his own and his own did not accept him" we read in the Prologue at the beginning of John's gospel. Are we different? Are we open to be moved by God's loving mercy?

## 5. MY OWN UNWORTHINESS

I must take more time to reflect on my own response to God's love. Certainly he expected that I would understand our relationship, once I realized that everything I have comes from him. To cite only a few things: my life, my health, the love of my parents, the affection of my friends, my faith, my education, my warm embrace of the world in which he put me—all these are his gifts to me. He expected so much, and I have returned so little.

1. The reality of sin. I begin by acknowledging that sin is a reality in my life. Not "taking a wrong turn," not making a mistake, not "being untrue to myself," not "doing something wrong," not giving in to impulse, not "showing my worst side to the world," not disappointing my expectations for myself--but sin, real sin, actions that

are morally wrong. Possibly thoughts and desires or personal acts, actions that appear to hurt no one but myself. Even actions that are morally wrong but without social consequence.

Sin is an act of self-will standing up against God. Deep in my heart I know when something is morally bad—whether it affects others or not—and I do it anyway. I scrap the advice of my conscience. I go against God’s will for me. I do something wrong. It is sin.

I may commit sin by myself or with another, it may be in act or only in mind, it may be public or it may be private, it may have temporary or lasting effects, it may affect large numbers of people or it may affect only one person, even just myself. It may be something I do, or something I leave undone. But sin is always a moral disorder. It is an offense against God, who gave me conscience and good sense. It is voluntary and it pits me against God. It fractures, even breaks apart, our relationship.

2. In my own life. When did I commit my first sin? Was it at home, in school, on the playground? Was it by myself or with others? Were there more and other sins? Serious ones? How did I feel about these things? Did I realize I was committing an offense against God? Was sin only a rare thing for me, or didn’t I care how much wrong I did?

I can look through my life, stage by stage. What kinds of sins have I committed? Have I ever told God I was sorry for my sins, for having offended him? Did I do harm to others—physical harm, moral harm, hurting a reputation, owing a debt?

Whatever sins I have committed, I realize these are offenses against God. These are times when I said: “I will not serve. I will not obey. You can’t tell me what to do.” They are sins against my loving Father, against a God who has shown so much kindness to me. He has held out his hand, and I have deliberately rejected him. Besides this, I am responsible in part for the sufferings of Christ’s passion and death. “He loved me,” St. Paul said, “and he laid down his life for me.” (Gal 2/20)

Besides all this, I know that sin does not go unpunished, that God who establishes the moral order is our judge when we have done wrong, and that he punishes sin, even severely, in this life or in the next.

3. Starting again. When I consider the offenses I have committed against God, against my neighbor, against myself, even against the material world of which I am a part, what shall I say? Can I say I am sorry, truly sorry for the wrong I have done, for having offended God, for injuring my neighbor, even for the punishment I deserve? Am I sorry when I think of Christ dying on the cross for my sins? God, who requires our obedience and knows that we can freely violate his will, also knows our weakness and desires us to return to his love.

To be truly sorry for our sins and to ask God’s mercy is the action that is most needed at this time in the retreat. It is impossible to go forward confidently and with benefit unless one is willing to take this step. Real repentance is the basis for all advance in God’s love. Acknowledging our sinfulness is the essential condition for following the way of Christ.

The gospels have many places where God extends his hand in mercy. Chapter 15 of Luke's gospel has several passages where Christ tries to convince his disciples that God's mercy is his crowning gift. We see Christ forgiving the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8/1-11) and the paralyzed man brought to Jesus to be healed (Mt 9/2) The best example of all is when Christ is hanging on the cross and says simply, "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23/34)

Catholics at this point may want to approach a priest for confession. Others should bow their heads and humbly ask God's pardon for their sins. He is always ready to forgive, as Christ shows us in the gospel.

It is a good practice to review our life every day, or twice a day, at mid-day and in the evening (the Daily Examen). If we recall God's kindness to us and the way we have responded to him and to our neighbor in the events of our day, we become much more attuned to God's gentle guidance as he draws us closer to Christ.

## **6. GOD COMES TO SAVE US**

1. A new beginning. The Blessed Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—come at baptism to take up their home in our spirit. It is as if the cleansing water had swept the dwelling clean and God could enter in and feel at home. For the Blessed Virgin, who was conceived in Anna's womb without the taint of original sin, there was from the beginning nothing to bar God's special presence. From the first moment of her conception, the Trinity came to dwell in Our Lady's soul and made it radiant with their presence. She was lovely beyond all women and she lived in intimate union with the Trinity.

She knew that she was loved by God, but when God sent the archangel Gabriel to ask her to be the mother of the Messiah (Lk 1/26-38), she was troubled by Gabriel's greeting: "Rejoice, O highly favoured daughter. The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women." (1/28) In the course of his visit, Gabriel told Mary that God had chosen her to be the mother of Jesus, the Savior who was to reign as king forever. Gabriel explained that the Holy Spirit would enable her to conceive. Would she accept? Yes, of course she would accept. She was God's obedient servant.

And so "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." (John 1/14) God became man in the womb of the Virgin. In the history of the world, there had been other great moments when God reached down to touch human existence: the creation of Adam, the call of Abraham, the liberation of God's people through Moses. But there was none greater than this moment. It was the great turning point in human history. The Trinity looked upon the human race and reached out to it in compassion.

2. Loving image of the Father. God had already formed in Mary a heart of her own that reflected his goodness and love. Now, as the Holy Spirit breathed being and life into Mary's womb, a new Heart was created, that of her Son Jesus, formed perfectly in the likeness of the Father. All the glory and power of God his Father was reflected in the Heart of Jesus, all the love of the Trinity for mankind, all the kindness and mercy the Trinity wanted to shower on the human race. Here it was that creation,

tainted by the sin of Adam, was raised to the full nobility that God had envisioned for it from the beginning.

And in the Heart of Jesus mankind was finally able to return to the Father the quality of love and adoration that had been denied God for so many centuries:

Sacrifice or oblation you wished not,  
but ears open to obedience you gave me.  
Holocausts or sin-offerings you sought not;  
then said I, "Behold I come;  
in the written scroll it is prescribed for me.  
To do your will, O my God, is my delight,  
and your law is within my heart!" (Ps 40/7-9; cf. Hebrews 10/8,9)

The Heart of Christ, wonderfully united to the eternal Son of God, was the supreme work of the Trinity who formed Christ in the womb of the Virgin. It was the tabernacle of the Most High among men, it was the perfect image of God. All the Father's love for mankind was reflected in the Heart of Jesus. God's love had become incarnate in Christ.

Within weeks, Our Lady would feel the Heart of Christ beating alongside her own. She was the first to experience the power and goodness of this Heart. She was the first to adore this Heart and recognize its designs for mankind. Mary was the first to give loving veneration to the Sacred Heart of Christ.

What response can I make when I contemplate God's goodness in forming the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the Sacred Heart of Jesus? God invites me to share his delight in looking upon these wonderful works of his creation. Can I draw strength from cultivating a close relationship with the hearts of Mary and Jesus?

## **7. THE WORLD WAITS**

1. Blessed among women. The Trinity, which delighted to live in the soul of the Virgin, now took up its dwelling also in the precious infant within her womb. She became physically more aware of the child as he continued to grow, and she realized that the presence of the Trinity united them both. His Heart developed to full physical maturity and she looked forward to the time of Christ's birth.

After Gabriel left, Mary lost no time in hastening to the house of Elizabeth, some 85 miles south of Nazareth (Luke 1/39-56) In her beautiful Magnificat, Mary recognized that God had done great things for her, and she praised the mercy he had shown to the human race.

By the time Mary returned to Nazareth, it was evident that she was pregnant and, for the first time in the Gospel, Joseph's important role becomes clear. With God's guidance, he would take Mary as his wife—just as they had planned—and he would protect Mary and her infant with his life. (Mt 1/18-25)

2. A simple coming. As Mary's time for delivery approached, this young couple were required to travel to Bethlehem, the seat of David, so they could fulfil Caesar's edict for a census of his empire. (Lk 2/1-5) The Savior was born there in a sheltered place open to the cold night air, a stable or a cave, and was laid in a manger. Shepherds—simple, God-fearing men—came to worship the child, for he had been announced as their Messiah and Saviour, and they laid their gifts before the family.

Here is perfect simplicity. It puts to shame the pretensions of the proud. Christ would tell his disciples to learn from him because he is gentle and humble of heart. He would praise the poor in spirit and he would become weary walking all over Palestine as a teacher and itinerant preacher. He makes no display of himself and he seeks no honours. All this is evident from the first moment he appears on earth. He is born poor and lowly, as no other king in the history of the world, for his kingdom was not on this earth but elsewhere (John 18/36).

I am impressed with the idea of simplicity. What meaning does it have for my own life? Living simply, not cultivating a great reputation for its own sake, not seeking praise and admiration, turning all my talents to God's glory and the good of my neighbor, this is the message Christ gave us at Bethlehem. Christ said that unless we become as little children we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Where do I see room for improvement in my own life?

One thing was clear. Christ's rule would be born of love and his power would be what the Father had given him. He looked out upon a cold and brutal world, but he would overcome that world by the power of love, finally laying down his life to save his fellow man.

## **8. PRESENTED TO THE FATHER**

1. Prominence of the Holy Spirit. From the start of St. Luke's Gospel, the influence of the Holy Spirit becomes very clear. John the Baptist would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. (Lk 1/15) The Holy Spirit would bring about Christ's conception in Mary's womb (1/35). At Mary's coming, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit (1/41).

We are told that, when Joseph and Mary came to the Temple to present Jesus to the Lord, there was an elderly man Simeon "and the Holy Spirit was upon him." The Spirit had told him that he would not die before seeing the Messiah, and now he came into the Temple inspired by the Spirit. (Lk 2/25-27) He was joined by an elderly prophetess, Anna. It was an auspicious occasion, and Simeon, soon to pass on to the Lord, praised God for sending a Saviour to Israel and to the Gentile world.

2. Together in pain and blessing. Simeon also prophesied that many people would rise or fall as a result of Christ's coming and that his mother Mary would suffer because of the way her Son was treated. He ended by praising God now that his promise was fulfilled during Simeon's lifetime:

Now, Master, you can dismiss your servant in peace;  
you have fulfilled your word.  
For my eyes have witnessed your saving deed  
displayed for all the peoples to see:  
A revealing light to the Gentiles,  
The glory of your people Israel. (Lk 2/29-32)

We find it easy to join this small group gathered around the Infant Jesus and involve ourselves in their feelings. We should not leave out of our awareness the presence of God the Father, as the one to whom the newborn is presented, or the Holy Spirit, who brought them together. And of course, the Word, the Son of God become man, is the very center of attention. It is, like Christ's baptism, an occasion where the Blessed Trinity manifests its involvement in the redeeming work that Christ is undertaking.

We have here a simple family group, come together for a religious event. They are all people of deep faith; there are no alien elements threatening their security. They are observing the law of Moses. Despite the superstitious envy of Herod and his brutality and the threatening presence of the Romans, who merely tolerated the Temple and the Jewish religion, this is a moment of peace and a time of blessing. God is present in their midst.

For Christ, this was his first visit to his Father's house, the Temple, a place where he felt especially at home and which would figure significantly in his later life. From Jerusalem he returned with his parents to Nazareth, where he experienced the warmth of family life and grew steadily in his religious faith.

What meaning does all this have for us? We live in a cosmopolitan world and interact constantly with people of very different beliefs and codes of conduct. We need the experience, at least from time to time, of sharing in a community of kindred souls, people with whom we can worship, exchange ideas and enjoy ourselves in mutual faith and trust. Do we look for opportunities like that? Others are probably eager for the same thing. Should I take more initiative?

## **9. IN HIS FATHER'S SERVICE**

1. Dedicated to his Father. Each year the child Jesus would return to Jerusalem with his parents and relatives for the feast of Tabernacles. It was the major event of his entire year, for it gave him a chance to visit the Temple, his Father's house, and listen to the learned teachers.

We are told by Luke that, living with Mary and Joseph, he was advancing in wisdom, age and grace (2/40). He was known as the son of Joseph the carpenter; he respected Joseph and saw in him an image of his heavenly Father. But as he grew in wisdom, he knew that he must be guided principally by the wishes of his Father in heaven.

So it was that, when he was twelve and his parents took him for the annual feast, he became so absorbed with the heady discussions of the learned teachers that he remained behind when his parents left for Nazareth. It was a turning point in his life and that of his family, for he was pitting one responsibility against another, and the

will of his divine Father clearly must win out. It was not a difficult choice, but he knew it would mean anguish for his parents and that was painful for him.

2. His parents' sacrifice. Nevertheless, Joseph and Mary found him and respected his decision, difficult as it was for them. For they knew that this was a decisive moment in their relationship with their son, and they began to see his vocation in a different light. From now on, it would be his Father's will that would dominate his direction in life.

Parents all over the world face this moment with each of their children. It may be that a son or daughter realizes God is calling them to follow Christ in the priesthood or religious life. Or the child is moving toward a different goal than the parents have planned for him or her. Or perhaps the young man or woman has found the perfect person to love and cherish for life and it means leaving home. It is time to let go, and the wise parent turns to the Lord to draw wisdom and strength.

On the other hand, the young person must be careful to determine where the Lord is really leading him or her and must have the courage to carve a path for themselves. It is easy to put off hard decisions, but peace comes only when we take the necessary step, however challenging.

3. The courage to choose. Everyone, young or old, must face up to the fact that our lives tend to be dominated by two, or even several, magnetic centers that pull us in contrary directions. At the beginning, they are family and future life. As we proceed, they are our own family and our business or career. Sometimes we are torn between a dissolute life and our responsibilities. At times, addictions—to alcohol, drugs, gambling, even smoking—contend with obligations to our health, family, financial security, respect of our peers, possibly our sanity. Problems of ethics in conducting our business affairs may conflict seriously with our peace of soul.

In all such cases, a serious decision is needed, with God's help, to opt for the right choice. It is always a matter of seeking the way God points out to us and following it with courage. Christ had to make that choice when he remained in the Temple with the learned teachers. Each of us must make difficult choices in our own lives as well.

## **10. GOING FORTH IN THE NAME OF THE TRINITY**

1. The Trinity revealed. Christ was 30 years old and he knew it was time to start preaching the kingdom. John, his cousin, had been living a harsh life in trackless areas for the last several years and had been attracting large numbers of people to repent and be baptized. Christ left home, saying goodbye to his mother, and went down to the Jordan River where John was baptizing. As he stood there waiting to be baptized, John held back; he should be baptizing me, John thought. Christ insisted, knowing that he was bearing the sins of all the world. As Christ emerged from the water, the heavens were opened, the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove, and the Father said, "You are my beloved Son. On you my favour rests." (Luke 3/22)

The Blessed Trinity—the three divine Persons--testify to the validity of Christ's role as Son of God and Messiah. It is a public declaration signifying the pleasure of the

Trinity in the Word's becoming man and encouraging Jesus to carry forward his work of redemption. Christ's Heart was filled with joy in his Father's good pleasure and he was overwhelmed by this generous outpouring of God's favour. It was an exalted moment that he would reflect back on many times, until he heard that voice bearing the Father's endorsement once again just before his Passion. (cf. Jn 12/28)

2. Confident in his mission. Christ now knew that he had his Father's support as he went forward on his mission. He rose from the waters to face the challenge of choosing his disciples. John helped him by pointing him out to two of his followers, Andrew and, very likely, John. They in turn brought their friends, and within a short time, the body of key disciples was complete. With eager and loyal followers, Christ could begin his work of teaching them about the kingdom of God. He would have the confidence to send them out with the Good News of his coming, much as the Father had sent him. The news of redemption was under way.

3. A new creation. We may pause here to recognize the importance of Christ's coming in the eyes of the Blessed Trinity. In their eternal plan for mankind, Christ's work was to restore the luster of the first creation, to re-make sinful man in the image and likeness of God. This would be done by the second Person of the Trinity, through whom all things were made. Now, in his humanity, he was to be the instrument of this re-creation. God would be able to pour out his love on mankind once again through Jesus Christ. Looking into the Heart of Jesus, God saw a purity that mirrored his own wonderful beauty. Of course it is his plan that other hearts will image the love of his Son's Heart, so that God will find the wholehearted love he desires in each of us. Each person must ask: Can the Father look down on me and say: "This is my beloved son or daughter in whom I am well pleased"?

4. A pattern of rejection. It was good that Christ's mission was blessed by the Trinity, for it would be widely rejected by the Jewish people. Their leaders—the high priests, elders, scribes and Pharisees—were against him almost to a man. They not only opposed him and tried to trip him up, but they were intent on arresting him and putting him to death. Members of his own family lost confidence in him. (Jn 7/5) The people who shouted hosannas when he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday turned against him and clamoured for his crucifixion the following Friday. His close disciples deserted him during his passion, and their leader, the stalwart Peter, denied three times that he even knew him.

Only occasionally in the gospels do we sense the hurt this pattern of rejection caused Jesus. As his passion approached, he cried out one day: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ... how often have I yearned to gather your children, as a mother bird gathers her young under her wings, but you refused me." (Mt 23/37) Christ's feelings cannot have been so different from what our own would be. We can understand the pain he experienced when his own people turned against him, for he said his mission was "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Mt 15/25) He could say, in the words of the "Reproaches" on Good Friday:

My people, what have I done to you?  
How have I offended you? Answer me!

Christ who showed such compassion for the poor and the suffering deserves to find in us a compassionate response in his disappointment at being rejected by his people.

## 11. CHRIST AND SATAN

1. Confronting his enemy. After Christ's baptism, the Holy Spirit guided Jesus into a desolate area where he was to spend 40 days fasting and praying, while living amid wild beasts. It seems like an unlikely interruption in his preaching of God's kingdom, but in prayer with his Father and in the company of the Holy Spirit, he considered this a retreat to prepare himself for the hard days ahead. It was an ideal time to spend with the Holy Trinity, which carried on its dynamic activity within his spirit.

During these challenging days, God allowed Satan to tempt Jesus at least on several occasions (Mt 4/1-11), possibly many more times. Satan knew who he was, as the devils that Jesus cast out of many people testified. What a coup it would be to catch him in the devil's wiles. But Satan failed miserably on two occasions: when he wanted Jesus to turn stones into bread and when he invited Jesus to bow down and pay him homage. The third temptation was a master stroke. He took Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple and suggested he cast himself down, since angels would be there to catch his fall, so proving the truth of Psalm 91 ("He will bid his angels take care of you ... that you may never stumble on a stone."). But Jesus was not fooled. He warned Satan against tempting God's providential care.

Jesus confronted Satan many other times in his life. He cast him out of many people, young and old, who were possessed by the devil. Once he sent a whole flock of devils into a band of wild pigs (Mk 5/13). Christ knew that the devil had entered into Judas' heart when he left the Last Supper to betray his Master. (Jn 13/27) Satan saw his hour of triumph when Jesus was raised high on the cross. But Jesus knew that Satan's long dominion was finally ended by Christ's very sacrifice and that Satan had lost forever his hold on the world (Jn 12/31).

2. Battling for my soul. It's easy to see our lives as battlegrounds where Christ and Satan are fighting to win each of us to their side. Jesus exerts gentle pressure in attracting us to himself and to his work of drawing people to his Father. His vision is as broad as the entire world and he invites us individually to take some small part in this holy enterprise.. He makes it clear that he "has come not to be served by others, but to serve, to give his own life as a ransom for the many." (Mt 20/28) Am I capable of sacrificing my comfort and convenience to join Christ in this great campaign?

Satan, on the contrary, wants to trick people into turning away from Christ and bringing them to destruction. The father of lies, he promises passing pleasures, intense and blinding in their attractiveness. He offers the world, but all his promises turn to ashes. I should ask: What means does Satan take to deceive me? Does he blatantly tempt me to serious sin? Is he more subtle, trying to disguise the treacherous disloyalty of sin by some clever ruse? Have his efforts succeeded? Have I gained insight into his tricks? Am I ready now to turn my back on him and give myself completely to Christ?

3. Selecting the key issue. We are aware of some of the weaknesses that Satan wants to capitalize on in his battle for our soul. These have probably stood out prominently in your prayerful reflections during this retreat. At this time, you should single out some one pressing problem that calls for a solution, some one serious need, some challenging decision, an important issue that must be resolved. Dealing effectively with this matter should occupy your attention during the remainder of the retreat. You need to think the matter through outside of prayer, arrive at a clear determination, then summon the motivation in prayer to reach your objective. It will help to discuss this with your spiritual counselor. This retreat will succeed only if you handle this matter effectively.

## 12. PREACHING REPENTANCE

1. Submitting to God's rule. Most of us wonder if we'll have enough years to carry out our plans, to complete this or that important work we have to do. Jesus Christ would have only three short years to fulfil the tasks his Father set for him. There would be no delay. We are told that after his desert experience, Jesus began immediately to proclaim this theme: "Reform your lives! The kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Mt 4/17)

It was the same as the cry of John the Baptist: "Reform your lives! The reign of God is at hand." (Mt 3/2) People came from all parts of Palestine to the River Jordan to confess their sins and be baptized by John. Christ our Lord would instead go out to the people and preach to them where they lived and worked. He would draw his images and stories from their daily lives, always stressing his Father's love for them and their need to return that love.

Much of Christ's time was spent in teaching, especially instructing his close followers, the Apostles; but the work of preaching the kingdom was always prominent in his contact with people. The command "Reform your lives!" was the keystone of his preaching, for he had come to re-unite mankind with God his Father, and sin was at the heart of man's alienation from God.

2. A radical change. What Jesus demanded was that people have the humility to acknowledge their sins (e.g. the tax collector vs. the Pharisee praying in the temple, Lk 18/9-14), that they sincerely repent (e.g. the prodigal son, Lk 15/11-32), and that they redirect their lives to faithful service. This fundamental reorientation of one's life is called *metanoia*, a complete change of heart that turns a person from a life of sin to the service of God and neighbor. "Re-forming one's life" means exactly that: making a radical change, breaking with the past, being ready to move in a productive, new direction.

There are occasions in all of our lives that call for a new direction: the sudden loss of a spouse or loved one, termination of one's longtime employment, a catastrophic accident, or the rapid onslaught of a debilitating illness. We can face such a situation with depression and despair, or we can see it as an opportunity to redirect our life to an urgent and useful purpose.

Christ's preaching called for moral renovation in his hearers--becoming new persons in the way they think and act. Reforming their lives meant that from then on people would forsake sin and make the love of God and their neighbor the driving force in their lives. This is the kind of moral renovation Christ was looking for.

### 13. THE PERFECT TEACHER

1. The blessed ones. When Jesus taught groups of people, he generally sat down and let them crowd around him, as he did in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7); on another occasion, he got into a boat to teach the people gathered on the shore. It's clear from the pages of the Gospel that Christ was a master teacher, in close personal contact with his audience, adapting his technique perfectly to the understanding and feelings of the people.

One good example of Christ's teaching is the Beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5/2-12). Christ was speaking to simple people who faced problems typical of the poor all over the world. He said those who are *poor in spirit* (i.e., who are not attached to whatever they have) are blessed, or fortunate, because they can look forward to the kingdom of heaven. They will not cling to earthly goods because, as he said elsewhere, "Where your treasure is, there your heart is also" (Mt 6/21). These were thoughts the poor related to quite easily. He said too that the *humble* or gentle-hearted should be happy because they can see the entire world as their inheritance. Those who are *sorrowing* are assured that they will be consoled.

God will fully satisfy those *who hunger and thirst for holiness*. Blessed are those *who show mercy*, for mercy will be theirs. Blessed are the *pure of heart*, for they shall see God. Happy are the *peacemakers* because they will be recognized as children of God. Blessed are those who are *persecuted* for leading an upright life; they will be taken up into the kingdom of God.

We are told that one of the things people admired most about Jesus was that, unlike the scribes, he taught with authority (Mt 7/29). Christ spoke like another Moses and they listened to him with respect.

2. Persecuted with Christ. The poor understood his message. They were accustomed to be looked down on, considered of little value, useful only to serve the needs of the rich and the powerful. Those who followed Christ would soon find they would be persecuted and insulted and slandered. They would be universally hated on account of Christ (Mt 10/22) But they should rejoice and be glad because they merit a great reward in heaven. The prophets of past ages were treated in exactly the same way.

Christ's Heart went out to those poor, distressed people. They realized what it was to be oppressed. He felt completely at home with them. Unlike his more learned hearers, they listened to him eagerly. They understood him and what he was teaching them. He assured them they were the fortunate ones—not the rich and the proud and the self-satisfied—because the kingdom of heaven was made for people like them.

3. Teaching by word and action. Jesus taught his disciples constantly as he walked with them along the dusty roads of Palestine. He would point to a field of newly

turned earth and tell a parable about how the word of God, like the farmer's seed falling on rich soil, must be received with open minds to take root. (You may want to reflect on how Christ taught by parables. See "Teaching by Parables.") He noted a shepherd walking along with a stray sheep in tow and told about God's mercy for the sinner. He spoke of the birds of the air and the wildflowers in such abundant beauty and reminded us that these are the concern of his Father in heaven. (Mt 6/26-34)

He taught them by the way he acted in various situations—when the Pharisees and Scribes tried to catch him in an inconsistency or accused him of being in league with Satan, or when little children craved for his attention, or when the disciples on the way to Emmaus thought all their hopes for a Messiah were gone. (Lk 24/13-35)

He also taught them by commenting on their behavior: when the disciples were arguing about who among them was the greatest, or when they were worried their boat would capsize on the stormy lake, or when Thomas had to see and touch him in order to believe (Jn 20/24-29).

He was a gentle teacher, always patient with their weak faith or lack of understanding. He was stern when the situation demanded, as when Peter chided him for talking about his passion (Mt 16/23). He took the time to explain carefully what he meant, as with the parable about the sowing of seed on good or bad soil. He used every opportunity to turn their attention to his heavenly Father and instilled a warm confidence in God's concern for them.

Jesus the teacher had only one goal, to tell people about God's kingdom and to make them understand what is needed to reach that kingdom. The Son of Man came to serve (Mt 20/28) and to save "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Mt 15/24)

## 14. FAITH AND MIRACLES

We are astonished, when we read through the gospels, what a large number of miracles Christ worked during the three years of his public life. These ranged all the way from the cure of Peter's mother-in-law from a fever (Mk 1/30-31) to the raising of Lazarus after he had been buried for four days (Jn 11/39-44). One may question whether all of the wonders called signs or miracles should be classified as such, but the testimony of the early Church regarding what Christ did is so strong as to convince all but the most determined rationalist that Christ performed many works beyond any natural explanation. It has been said that an abundance of miracles was a sign of the messianic age. Anyone with open eyes should have recognized that these miracles heralded the coming of the Messiah.

1. At Mary's request. The first of Christ's miracles—the one that led Christ's disciples to believe in him—was at the request of his mother Mary (Jn 2/1-11). They were all attending a wedding feast at Cana, a small town near Nazareth, and the crowd was so great that they ran out of wine. This meant a disastrous end to a lively party and threatened the reputation of the host, who was probably not aware of the situation. It was then that Mary stepped in and asked Jesus to come to the rescue. It seemed premature for Christ to work a miracle at this time, but he complied with Mary's request and changed six large stone jars of water into good wine. The wedding

celebration went on without incident. What we note clearly here is that it was Mary's faith in Jesus that led him to work this miracle. Faith would be requisite in every miracle Jesus worked.

2. He won favour with the people. Matthew says that, at the very start of his mission, Christ toured all of Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and preaching the good news (Mt 4/23-25). He attracted a large following, and everywhere he went the people brought their relatives and friends who were sick, lame, possessed, or out of their minds. He cured them all and the good news spread throughout the area as far as Jerusalem. Could some of these cures be due to his magnetic personality? Certainly. But the power he exercised cannot be denied. Sudden cures on a multitude of individuals with various illnesses cannot easily be dismissed as psychotherapy.

We are struck by the popular acclaim Jesus acquired by his preaching and powers of healing. The people genuinely believed in the power and authority of this man and they showed their belief by flocking to him. They could not deny that he brought new hope into their lives. They instinctively accepted him.

3. Faith was essential. Jesus was called upon even by a pagan, a Roman centurion, to cure his servant, who was paralyzed and suffering badly, and he did so from a distance (Mt 8/5-13); he is astonished at this soldier's great faith. But he went into the house of Jairus, though mourners were mocking him, to raise Jairus' daughter, who had died. Along the way he cured a woman suffering from a hemorrhage that had lasted for 12 years after she merely touched the hem of his garment. (Lk 8/41-56) All he asked for everywhere was faith. If they believed in him, he was ready to cure them. We are told that he didn't work many miracles in Nazareth, his home town, because of their lack of faith. (Mt 13/58)

4. Cleansing from moral guilt. Despite his desire to cure physical illness and cast out devils, he was even more concerned about people's moral condition. When friends had gone to great trouble to bring a paralyzed man before Jesus to be cured, we are told that, when Jesus saw their faith, he turned to the man and said, "My son, your sins are forgiven." The people were astonished and the Pharisees claimed this was blasphemy; only God could forgive sins. Then, to show he had the power to forgive sins, Jesus turned to the man and told him to take up his pallet and walk away. (Mk 2/3-12) At times Jesus bade farewell to a person he had cured by saying: "And sin no more." Even as he was dying on Calvary, after hearing the thief at his side express repentance, he turned to him and said he would be with him that day in paradise. Always faith in Jesus and cleansing from moral guilt went hand in hand with compassion for physical ills.

5. Some refused to listen. Although people on all sides recognized the power and goodness of Jesus, the Jewish leaders refused to believe in him. We wonder what stopped them. Were they afraid he would steal believers away from their control? Were they too proud of their rectitude to tolerate any opposition? Were they too lazy to see what he was doing, to hear what he was preaching, to pay any attention to his claim that he acted under the power of God? How often does it happen that simple people are ready to listen, while others proud of their superiority have no desire to listen and believe?

6. Faith in seeking God's help. Outside of the need for repentance, no message is stronger in the gospel than the importance of faith. The same faith needed for miracles is what Jesus urges upon his followers in seeking God's help. He said simply: "Ask, and you will receive. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened for you." (Mt 7/7) He said: "I give you my word, if you are ready to believe that you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer, it shall be done for you." (Mk 11/24)

Jesus frequently upbraided his disciples for their lack of faith. He said: "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you would be able to say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move. Nothing would be impossible for you." (Mt 17/20) He assured his apostles at the Last Supper: "Whatever you ask the Father, he will give you in my name." (Jn 16/23)

After all Christ's emphasis on faith, we ask ourselves: How strongly do I believe? Despite all the Lord's assurances, and his frequent help in the past, do I really ask God, in Christ's name, with absolute faith? Do I pray for a stronger faith? Does my faith make a difference in my everyday life? Do I help others to have a stronger faith?

## **15. "PERFECT, LIKE YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER"**

1. The way to the Father. The pages of the gospels are filled with evidence of Christ's deep and personal attachment to his Father in heaven. He speaks of the Father living in him and himself living in the Father. He repeatedly speaks of glorifying the Father. He tells Phillip that the person who sees Jesus sees the Father also. Jesus teaches us the Our Father as the perfect way to pray. He wants us to look upon God as our loving Father.

Jesus tells us that no one can come to the Father except through him. He is the way, the only way. (Jn 14/6) And he shows us the way to the Father by his example and his teaching. What remarkable insights he gives us, especially in Matthew, chapters 5-7, to come to know the Father. Having taught us the Our Father, he tells us that we must place our absolute confidence in the Father. If he cares for the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, how much more will he care for us! (Read Mt 6/26-34.)

2. Dependent on God our Father, Acting in his likeness. Our Father provides everything for us and we can trust him absolutely. If we ask the Father confidently for what we need, he will certainly give it. "Would one of you hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf, or a poisonous snake when he asks for a fish? . . . How much more will your heavenly Father give good things to anyone who asks him!" (Mt 7/9-11)

Jesus holds out to us an extraordinary ideal. He says that, if we expect God to forgive us, we must be ready to forgive the faults of others. (Mt 6/14-15) In fact, we must love our enemies and pray for our persecutors. "This will prove that you are sons of your heavenly Father, for his sun rises on the bad and the good, he rains on the just and the unjust." (Mt 5/45) And when we are merciful, or when we fast, we must do so in secret, not parading our good deeds before men. In short, "you must be . . . perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Mt 5/48)

3. Holiness of life. Jesus is calling us to be perfect, to be holy as God our Father is holy. Jesus is the perfect image of the Father. He is like a mirror reflecting the Father's love, his perfection. In seeing him, he reminds us, we see the Father. (Jn 14/9) Our holiness then consists in becoming more like Christ. Jesus is telling us also that, to be sons and daughters in the likeness of our Father in heaven, we must reflect the love and kindness of Christ, as we manifest his image to the world. "Such as my love has been for you, so must your love be for each other." (Jn 13/34)

Christ clearly wants us to develop a personal, trusting relationship with the Father such as he had. This relationship is based squarely on God's personal love for each of us, mirroring his deep love for Jesus. "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even if she should forget, I will never forget you" (Isaiah 49/15). People who are at peace with God, who strive to be free of anxiety, are convinced that God loves them personally and deeply, and nothing can shake that conviction. It is like a solid rock on which their entire lives are built. Confident of God's personal love, they can build a productive life that brings hope to many people.

We must ask: Are we satisfied with doing the minimum? Just getting by? Does the idea of holiness frighten us? Do we have the courage to dare great things for Christ? Will we continue to be satisfied with mediocre service?

## **16. REFLECTING THE KINDNESS OF JESUS**

1. A compassionate Heart. On nearly every page of the gospels, we are struck with the kindness of Jesus. Christ's Heart went out to the poor widow of Naim, whose only son was being carried to the grave. Christ stopped the funeral procession, brought the young man back to life and gave him to his mother. (Lk 7/11-15) When crowds of people had listened to Christ for three days and were hungry, he was moved with pity for them. He had them sit down and relax on the plots of grass, and he fed them miraculously. (Mt 15/32-38) To the poor man who had waited 38 years to be healed in the Sheep Pool in Jerusalem, Christ said simply, "Stand up! Pick up your mat and walk!" (Mt 5/8)

He did not hesitate when he saw that people were in need and believed he could help them. He acted spontaneously and powerfully; he responded with his Heart. He had compassion for an entire world, as he showed when he died for us on the cross, and he reaches out to each individual person who seeks his help. If we want to know Christ, we must see him dealing with the blind and the crippled, those possessed by the devil, those wracked by the torment of sins they have committed. We must look on him too when he tolerates the arrogance of those powerful persons who thwart his mission, seek to humiliate him, and finally put him to a painful death.

2. "Learn from me." God uses people of very different personalities to carry out his work. Paul the ardent missionary moved tirelessly from one town to another, abused and ill-treated by Jew and Gentile alike. The gentle Apostle John, who rested his head against Christ's breast at the Last Supper, worked to form a community of believers schooled in the love of God in Ephesus. John the Baptist excoriated the Pharisees for their vain and showy ways. It was quite different with Christ.

Jesus led people to follow him by gentle persuasion. He won people because he knew how difficult their lives were and understood their needs. With him they would find comfort and peace. "Come to me," he said, "all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you. ... Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of Heart." (Mt 11/28-29) From the kind way he dealt with the sick and the troubled, people saw a warm and gentle Heart that was the driving force behind all he did.

Think now of the ways in which Christ has always shown his kindness to you. Can you see in your own life how personal and individual Christ's love has been for you? When you reflect on how he brought you into God's family through baptism, how he chose you to follow him--possibly as a priest or religious, or as a strong Christian--and how he has kept you as his companion and friend through the years, you can be astonished at how much he has loved you. On many occasions you could have proved disloyal to him and he kept you from falling away. If you did leave him for a time, he called you back and welcomed you into his arms. He continues to use you to bring his kindness and the message of his Good News into other people's lives.

3. A love like Christ's. The preeminence of the virtue of love comes from the fact that it is given without expecting any return. Certainly Jesus was not looking for any response, except perhaps gratitude, from the blind beggars he cured, or from the people from whom he cast out devils. Nor has he bargained for a return on what he has done for you. His kindness to you has been freely given. That's the way of love. Can you say it has been as freely returned?

No lesson Jesus gave us is more important than the conviction that God loves us personally. We have a strong sense of the Father's love for us because it is reflected perfectly in the love of the Heart of Jesus.

If Christ is the image of the Father, he expects us to be Christ's image in the world around us. Are we not his presence in the world today? In seeing us, people must be able to see Jesus Christ. They must be able to see beyond me to the Heart of Jesus himself.

## **17. "... THE WAY YOU WOULD HAVE THEM TREAT YOU"**

1. Neighbors in need. "He went about doing good." Jesus rapidly became known for his kindness to everyone who begged for his help. "Rabboni," the blind man said, "I want to see." (Mk 10/51) If a person asked in faith, Jesus never refused. His Heart went out to the poor and the sick, the lame and the sorrowing. "The Lord hears the cries of the poor." The God who is spoken of in Psalm 34 as biased in favour of the afflicted and distressed walked among us as Jesus Christ.

Is it surprising that Jesus makes helping one's neighbor the defining mark of his followers? Not only that, but it is the key to eternal life. Jesus tells us that only those who do such things as feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, comforting the sick and visiting those in prison will be welcomed into the heavenly kingdom. Even more significant, he regards the

kindness we show to those in need as done to himself: “As often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me.” (Mt 25/40; cf. 31-46)

2. Thinking first of others. When he was asked what is the main commandment, Jesus spoke of our need to love God with our whole heart and soul, but he quickly added: “And the second [commandment] is: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mt 22/39) What a strong demand this is: We tend always to think first of ourselves. Is it possible to put our neighbor in that same position? We know how difficult this command is from the many times we violate it every day.

This is the same as what Christ said in the Sermon on the Mount: “Treat others the way you would have them treat you” (Mt 7/12). It is the perfect law of charity. Those who carry it out are saints.

3. A reflection of Christ’s love. In his concern for those in need, we gain great insight into the spirit of Jesus Christ. He shows the tender love of a mother, with the constant affection of a friend, and with the power of one formed by the Holy Spirit.

Christ taught us that we are bonded together as children of God. We don’t pray: “My Father in heaven,” but “Our Father, who art in heaven.” The use of “Our” every time we pray reminds us of our common origin, our responsibility for each other, our common destiny. We will never reach heaven alone. We will find salvation together with the good people we have been privileged to help. When we help our neighbor, they are helping us to gain our eternal home.

Sometimes we forget that those who are closest to us need and deserve our kindness most of all. We know that we sometimes treat outsiders—totally unknown people—better than we treat members of our own family, even our spouse and our children. Why this happens is a mystery. Do we take these people so much for granted that we feel justified to treat them harshly? What kind of logic is that? We know that the Heart of Christ must have been pained at his disciples’ lack of faith, their slowness to understand, their ambition to get ahead of the others. Yet he is never harsh, he seldom censures them, he treats them with respect. It is a marvelous example for us to follow with those who are nearest and dearest to us.

## **18. TAKE MY YOKE**

1. Gentle and humble of heart. Christ said: “Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart.” (Mt 11/29) This is the way we see him on every page of the gospel: compassionate, generous, warm, self-effacing, respectful of the poor, hard-working, reliant upon God, loving children, concerned for sinners, ready to forgive—a man who readily wins the respect and admiration of others. People are immediately attracted to him. He is the kind of leader they have always wanted. They are ready to cast aside everything they have to follow him wherever he goes.

This is how Jesus is always depicted in literature, the personality he has when portrayed in movies. The gentle, thoughtful, intelligent person who instinctively penetrates to the inner thoughts of people and responds to their deep-felt needs—this is the Jesus who reveals his Heart to us, as he did to those who knew him when he

walked the earth. “Come to me ... your souls will find rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden light.” (Mt 11/28-30)

2. His winnowing-fan is in his hand. Yet there is a toughness in Christ, a stern message that he made very clear from time to time. It would not pay to overlook this other side of the Lord’s teaching. He would not leave things in status quo. He said he came to cast fire on the earth (Lk 12/49), to destroy self-complacency, to cleanse the earth, to allow new growth and inspire new hope. John the Baptist told his followers: “His winnowing-fan is in his hand” to separate the chaff from the grain. (Mt 3/12) Jesus said: “My mission is to spread, not peace, but division (Mt 10/34)--not to bring peace, but a sword. He speaks about setting a person at odds with those closest to him: father, mother, daughter-in-law, and so forth (Mt 10/35). He entered the temple area and drove out the money-changers and dove-sellers, saying they were turning God’s house into a den of thieves (Mt 21/12-13). This angered the high priests and Jewish elders, and Christ told his apostles they would be universally hated because of their loyalty to him (Mt 10/22). His enemies hated Christ, and the servant was to be no greater than his master (Jn 13/16).

What is this harshness that enters into Christ’s discourse and way of acting? Is this the same Jesus who said: “Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you”? (Mt. 11/28) What is behind this stringent talk? In another context, Jesus told his followers: If your hand “scandalizes” you, cut it off! (Mk 9/43) This way of speaking doesn’t sound at all like Jesus.

Part of our shock at this talk is because of the semitic style of speaking; ideas were expressed dramatically to make an impression. But we cannot overlook Christ’s meaning behind these strong words.

Jesus is telling us that people must be uncompromising in following his way. Families will be torn apart. There will be pain and even death for his disciples. He himself will be rejected and must bear the humiliation of the cross. His followers cannot avoid sharing his fate.

3. Take my yoke upon you. How can we reconcile these two different sides of the Lord’s teaching? The more we know Jesus, the more we are struck by his honesty. He will not deceive us. There is a gracious, pleasant side to following him, but there is also a painful side that we must accept as well. Nothing will be gained by failing to embrace both parts of the Lord’s call. “Whoever puts his hand to the plow but keeps looking back is unfit for the reign of God” (Lk 9/2). The decision to follow Jesus means rejecting all other options; there is no other way.

However, going back to where Jesus calls all “who are weary and find life burdensome,” we recall that he tells us to “Take my yoke upon your shoulders...” (Mt. 11/28-29) This can mean nothing less than that Jesus is bidding us to share his burden and he will share ours. When two animals are yoked together: they move together, they act as a unit, they bear hardship together and their strength is more than doubled. This is the metaphor Christ uses that vindicates all the pain of opting for Christ’s service. We are joined together; we are not alone in bearing hardship. Our strength comes from this loving companionship.

## 19. THE ENDURING GIFT

1. Fulfilling a pledge. Jesus “loved his own in this world, and would show his love for them to the end.” (Jn 13/1) So John begins his account of the Last Supper before Christ’s passion. He knew that he would return to the Father in a short time. His disciples would miss him and they would need the assurance of his presence, for they would face hostility and persecution in winning people to his gospel and establishing his Church. How would it be possible for him to remain with them when he returned to his Father?

A year before, he had told them that he is the true Bread come down from heaven, and that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood if they would enjoy eternal life with him. (John 6/53-58) His disciples were puzzled and many left him then for lack of faith. Now it is time for him to fulfil this mystery and demonstrate in an extraordinary way his love for them.

2. An abiding sacrifice, a union in love. While they were at table, he took bread, gave thanks to his Father, and gave it to them saying: “This is my body to be given for you. Do this as a remembrance of me.” Then, after eating, he did the same with a cup of wine, saying: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you.” (Lk 22/19-20) He gave them his body to eat and his blood to drink. He was true to his word of a year before. He was linking this to his sacrifice on the following day, and he was saying how he would give himself to his followers down through the centuries.

When we think of the good things God has given us in life, this is certainly one of his greatest gifts. Though we could not be present on Calvary, he would give us a chance to take part in his sacrifice through the Mass. He would join us together at his table around the altar. He would be present to us and give himself to us, personally and individually, in the Eucharist. He would be physically present for all time in his Church. He could have found no more remarkable way to remain with us while he returned to glory with his Father.

Christ tells us that the Eucharist is our food for eternal life and it brings about an intimate union with him. The person who eats his flesh and drinks his blood “remains in me and I in him” . . . and “he will have life because of me, just as I have life because of the Father.” (Jn 6/56-57) Receiving the Eucharist is the only way to become totally alive, as Christ is wholly alive. That was the kind of vitality the world saw in holy people like Mother Teresa and Pope John XXIII.

3. A proper response. The Eucharist is to an astonishing degree a work of love. In this way Christ stays with us until the end of the world. The only question was: would we be willing to respond adequately to his love? When Christian hearts had lost their fervor toward the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Christ appeared to St. Margaret Mary and complained that people had grown cold and indifferent to his love, particularly in the Eucharist. He asked her to take the lead in drawing people to respond to his great love, to promote devotion to his Sacred Heart. Christ promised great benefits to priests, religious and lay people who would take up this challenge. His “twelve promises” are contained in the letters of St. Margaret Mary.

What could be clearer to a devoted follower of Jesus than the need to respond to his love, to draw as many people as possible to him, to satisfy the desires of his Heart? Those who have experienced the love Christ shows in the Eucharist spare no effort to help people everywhere to carry out his desires.

(*Note: On the passion and death of Jesus, you may want to read “A Physician Testifies about the Crucifixion” by Dr. C. Truman Davis at <http://www.konnections.com/Kcundick/crucifix.html> on the Internet.*)

## **20. OFFERED UP FOR OUR SINS**

1. Burdened with sin. When Jesus left the Last Supper with his disciples, he began to feel sorrow and distress. “My heart is nearly broken with sorrow,” he said. (Mt 26/37-38) As he approached the garden of Gethsemani, where he had frequently prayed with his apostles, he asked three of them—Peter, John and James—to remain with him and to stay awake while he prayed. They soon fell fast asleep. Jesus fell on his face in prayer saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Still, let it be as you would have it, not as I” (Mt 26/39).

What thoughts so oppressed the Heart of Jesus that he would cry out to his Father this way in anguish? The anticipation of his terrible passion was certainly part of it; he recoiled at the pain and humiliation he would experience. The infidelity of his chosen followers was there as well. But the great, almost insupportable burden was the sins of mankind from Adam down through the centuries that he was carrying, a burden that would be atoned for only by his death on the cross. In the Old Testament, the Jews loaded their sins onto the back of a goat, the “Judas goat,” and drove it away from them out of the camp into the desert. At the same time, a lamb was chosen to be sacrificed for their sins. In the same way the sins of all the world were loaded on the back of Jesus, and he must carry them to the cross, for he would be not only the goat but the lamb of sacrifice as well.

2. Like a criminal. Finally, Jesus woke his disciples as Judas and the rowdy crowd of temple guards and soldiers approached. Judas betrayed his Master with a kiss, and they led him forth like a criminal to face Caiaphas, the high priest, and Annas, his father-in-law. Jesus, subjected to arrogant questioning and the testimony of false witnesses, was slapped in the face by Annas’ servant, and was taken away to be ridiculed and humiliated by the guards during the night. Meanwhile, Peter, who was standing outside, denied three times that he had anything to do with Jesus. It was a bitter evening for Jesus.

The next morning, Jesus stood before the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jews, and was condemned to death, as they had decided some days before. They accused him of blasphemy because he spoke of God as his Father. They could have taken him out and stoned him to death, but that would not be enough. They must subject him to the humiliation of crucifixion, and so they took him to Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate questioned Jesus and could find no reason to condemn him. So he had him scourged, after which Jesus submitted to the mockery of the Roman soldiers. They dressed him in a red robe, like a king, and pressed a crown of thorns into his head.

3. The ultimate sacrifice. Pilate got no sympathy for Jesus when he brought him out before the crowd. Finally, he freed the criminal Barabbas at the crowd's insistence and, in an act of weakness and fear of the Jews, he condemned Jesus to be crucified.

It was exactly what the Jewish leaders had planned. But, even as Jesus was hanging from the cross, they ridiculed him, saying, "He saved others but he cannot save himself." (Mt 27/42) After several hours of agony, Jesus died from exhaustion, loss of blood, and the inability to continue drawing breath. He said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit," he bowed his head and died. There was no doubt about his death because a Roman centurion pierced his side with a lance, reaching his Heart, and blood and water poured out. He had been true to his words: "There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." (Jn 15/13)

## **21. ALIVE AND GLORIFIED**

1. "He is risen. He is not here." His mother Mary had stood by the cross to the end, and now she and John moved away in sorrow as others saw to Christ's burial. The Jews were to celebrate the Passover feast that evening, little realizing that the true Lamb of God had been sacrificed earlier that day, to win salvation for them and the whole world.

Early on Sunday morning, two days later, the faithful women found the tomb empty when they came to anoint Christ's body. He had been faithful to the Father's plan, right down to shedding the last drop of blood in a painful death. He had died entrusting himself entirely into the Father's hands, with absolute confidence that the Father would care for him. And so he did, in an extraordinary manner.

The Father raised him up, as he burst the bonds of death and was endowed with a spiritualized body that defied ordinary limits. Christ no doubt visited his mother to make up for the sword that had pierced her heart (cf. Lk 2/35) and heal her pain. He took time to console Mary Magdalen, weeping outside his tomb, but he asked her not to hold on to him because he had not yet ascended to his Father (Jn 20/17). That afternoon he joined two of his disciples walking to Emmaus and was recognized in the "breaking of bread." (Lk 24/13-35).

Christ delighted his apostles by appearing to them during supper the night of his resurrection, and again a week later when Thomas was present.(Jn 20/19-29) He joined them while they were fishing on the Sea of Galilee (or Tiberias) and prepared breakfast for them. (21/1-14)

2. Raised to glory. Christ had spoken of his death as glorifying the Father, and now it was time for the Father to glorify his Son. This he did by taking him into his presence in the fullness of his humanity and seating him at his right hand. He was filled once again with the glory that belonged to him before becoming man and he was adored by the angelic hosts of heaven for the new glory of his human condition. It was an overwhelming homecoming. The angels cried out:

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain  
to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength,  
honor and glory and praise! (Rev 5/12)

3. Absolute trust. There are times when our own problems are so great that we must commit ourselves wholeheartedly, almost blindly, into God hands. We do not know precisely how he will respond to our needs but, like Christ, we are absolutely confident that, because he loves us, he will bring us relief. Jesus bowed his head and died, committing himself completely into his Father's hands. He knew absolutely that his Father would provide for him. Without doubt, Christ's reliance on his Father must always be our model; it was richly rewarded.

4. Rejoicing with Christ. We should rejoice with the heavenly hosts at Christ's glorification. We who have come to know him better from walking with him and learning from his words were torn apart by the painful sufferings of his passion. Now he has been restored to a glorious state first seen in his Transfiguration (Mt 17/1-8); he has been the triumphant victor over death and Satan. He is at home with his Father, and this is where we approach him today. His glory is a foretaste of our own glory. We have been raised to a new level of loving trust by the glorification of Christ our Brother.

## **22. EMPOWERED BY THE SPIRIT**

After his resurrection, Christ remained with his followers only 40 days; he appeared to only about 500 of them. It would be their task to communicate to others the fact that Christ rose from the dead, and for all others to believe on their word. Christ made this point clear when he said to Thomas: "Blest are they who have not seen and have believed." (Jn 20/29)

1. In the power of the Holy Spirit. To their great sorrow, Christ then left his disciples, going, as he said, to prepare a place for them with their heavenly Father. He must have surprised them when he said:

It is much better for you that I go.  
If I fail to go, the Paraclete will never come to you,  
whereas if I go, I will send him to you. (Jn 16/7)

So they returned to the upper room, closed the windows and bolted the doors for fear of the Jews. They prayed earnestly for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Nine days later he came upon them in great fullness, and they would never be the same again. (Acts 2/2-4) They were completely changed by his coming; they were new men, new women.

From being weak and fearful, they were filled with courage. They broke open the doors and went out into the large crowds gathered for the Jewish feast of Pentecost. These simple fishermen confronted people they had never known before and told them fearlessly about the coming of the Messiah: that he was crucified, then rose again, and that they must repent of their sins to be saved in his name. That day 3,000 were added to the Christian community. Soon after, Peter and John would stand before the Sanhedrin and boldly tell them: "God raised from the dead ... Jesus Christ

the Nazorean whom you crucified.” (Acts 4/10) Later, still inspired with the courage of the Holy Spirit, they would lay down their lives for Christ.

2. Telling the Good News. The apostles suddenly understood their Lord and all he had told them with brilliant clarity. They could finally say that they knew Christ and they understood how his death and resurrection brought salvation to the world. They knew their role as Christ’s disciples and felt attached to him more strongly even than when they were walking with him. They were already fulfilling his expectations of them and they were confident he would be “with them all days until the end of the world.” The Holy Spirit had indeed brought them light and understanding. He loosed their tongues and they spoke freely and directly to all the diverse groups gathered before them. They had the gift of fluency to communicate their faith and enthusiasm to the crowds, and each person understood them in his or her own language.

3. Dominated by love. They knew immediately that Christ had shown them yet another proof of his love, and they responded in kind. Christ remained with them through the Holy Spirit he had sent. For this was the third Person of the Trinity, the Personal expression of the love of the Father and the Son. “God is love,” St. John would say (1 John 4/8), and this love is perfectly expressed in the Holy Spirit, who could be called Love personified. So they were filled with love: love for Christ and for the people he had brought to them to be saved. The Holy Spirit formed in them a heart like the Heart of Jesus he had formed years before in the womb of the Virgin.

The disciples knew that nothing could tear them away from loyalty to Christ—not temptations, not the hatred of their enemies, not their own fragile spirits. They belonged to him, utterly. The Holy Spirit had given them remarkable “virtues of the heart” and from now on, nothing could stand between themselves and Christ.

4. With the Holy Spirit in the days ahead. As you go forth from this retreat, you will want to recall how the Holy Spirit has been leading you during the course of your meditations. He has been pointing the way to a new and richer service of God. Now is the time to determine how, with God’s help, you will keep this movement alive. It is important that you talk this over with your spiritual director, and that you set aside some time each day for meditation. Make sure that the impetus and courage you have gained during this retreat is not wasted, but continues to drive you forward during the coming year. To plan along these lines, consult “With the Holy Spirit in the Days Ahead.”

## **23. CHRIST DWELLS IN OUR HEARTS**

1. Riches of the Heart. Paul tells the Ephesians he has been chosen to preach to the Gentiles the “unfathomable riches of Christ” (Eph 3/8). We have seen some of these riches at different times during this retreat. We reflected on Christ’s goodness in becoming man (Meditation 6), his bountiful mercy when we have sinned (Meditations 4 & 5), his compassion in our weakness (Meditation 16), and most of all the overwhelming love that led him to lay down his life for us on the cross (Meditation 20). In all these ways and many others, he is speaking to us from his Heart. Are we listening?

God's whole plan for mankind, upset by Adam's sin, was restored in a much more excellent way by the coming of Christ. In sending Christ, God went to extraordinary lengths to show his love for us. His plan was that we would be drawn to Christ by the tender bands of love (Hosea 11/4) and thus would enter into loving union with God our Father. We could return God's love because he would give us a new heart and a new spirit, replacing "your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts." (Ezekiel 36/26) Most of all, we could respond in love because Christ had come to dwell within our hearts.

2. Christ has shown us God's love. The Father reveals himself through Jesus Christ. God is love, John told his disciples (1 Jn 4/8), and this love is made known to us in Christ. John writes in the prologue to his gospel:

No one has ever seen God.  
It is God the only Son, ever at the Father's side,  
who has revealed him.

... we have seen his glory:  
the glory of an only son coming from the Father,  
filled with enduring love. ...

Of his fullness we have all had a share—  
love following upon love. (Jn 1/18, 14, 16)

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, St. Paul prays that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. When we experience the love of the Heart of Christ, Paul says, it will inspire a love that becomes the "root and foundation" of our lives. This will enable us to grasp fully "the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love," so that we may be drawn into intimate union with the Father and may "attain to the fullness of God himself." (Eph 3/16-19)

3. God lives in us. Note that Paul prays that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. Christ had said to his disciples:

Anyone who loves me will be true to my word,  
and my Father will love him;  
we will come to him  
and make our dwelling place with him. (Jn 14/23)

If we believe that Christ dwells in us, it is easy to see that he exercises his love in us. His love is a powerful force, a dynamic reality that demands a response in kind. It is our love for Christ that carries us up to the embrace of our Father in heaven.

Our love then for the Heart of Christ is far more than a "devotion." It is meant to be at the very center of our lives, to unite us intimately with God, and to be the inspiration of our work with Christ to bring all people into the kingdom of his Father.

4. Love impels to action. It is fine to talk about love as the basis of our union with God, but what specific effect does this love have in my life? Love is shown in deeds

--in a firm commitment to seek and carry out God's will. What about our love? Is it just feelings? or mere words? What effect will it have in my life?

Have I determined what changes Christ wants from me as a result of this retreat? Will I have the courage to make these changes? Have I placed my decisions in the Lord's hands? Am I confident that with his help I can carry this out?

## **24. SERVING CHRIST IN HIS CHURCH**

1. Christ's vision for his Church. As we look forward to end of our retreat, we must raise our sights to embrace Christ's vision for the world. He asked for a return of the love of his Heart. Was he thinking only of our love for himself as a person, or was he thinking also of our love for his Church?

Christ spent three years forming his apostles into a tightknit group who would carry his Good News to the ends of the world. It is true he had warm and loving relations with many individuals—with Peter and John, the beloved disciple, with Mary Magdalen, and with the family of Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Indeed, the first stirrings of his Heart were experienced by one individual, his mother Mary.

But when he returned to the Father after his resurrection, it was to his disciples gathered together as a group that he sent the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity, who is love personified, breathed the love of Christ into this group which became his Church. This love would keep them united and would spur their zeal for Christ's work.

Paul tells us that Christ is inseparably united to the Church in all its richness and complexity. He sees the Church in fact as the Body of Christ (Eph 1/23) and indicates that followers of Christ are engaged in building up the body of Christ in love until it reaches full maturity (Eph 4/15-16).

2. Loving Christ in his Church. It is clear then that the love we have for Christ cannot reach fulfillment unless it extends to his Body the Church. In loving the Church and building up the Church we are demonstrating our love for Christ most effectively. The Church, which is the Mystical Body of Christ, should be the focus of our love. It is where we can return Christ's love in many specific and concrete ways.

Paul also speaks of the Church as a building being constructed (Eph 2/20-22), with Christ as the capstone. We are living parts of that "holy temple" and the Spirit is our source of unity. He says: "In [Christ] you are being built up into this temple, to become a dwelling place for God in the Spirit." In serving the Church, we are helping to bring that holy temple to perfection.

How can we express our love for Christ effectively in his Church? Above all today, since Vatican II, we see the Church as the People of God. Our love for Christ must transcend a purely personal and intimate love of Christ as a person, as important as that is. We must see his Heart as the driving force of his union with the Church, the People of God, and direct our love and efforts toward achieving its full measure of perfection. After the example of leaders like Pope John Paul II, we must work

tirelessly to fulfil Christ's desires for his Church. Our union is with the Heart of Christ in the Church.

3. United in serving the Church. This means of course seeking a closer union with the Pope, bishops, priests, religious and zealous lay people, as well as with the entire People of God. It means working together as we engage in whatever works our talents enable us to perform in building up the Body of Christ. These talents are gifts of the Holy Spirit, as St. Paul indicates in his first letter to the Corinthians (ch. 12) and they are grounded in love.

Persons truly dedicated to the Heart of Christ will strain every effort to work for the good of his Church and the effectiveness of its pastoral work. In so doing, they will demonstrate the power of loving service and will inspire others to imitate their expression of love for Christ.

Over the years, especially since Christ's appearances to St Margaret Mary in 1673, the Church has gone to extraordinary lengths to honour Christ's Sacred Heart. Those who encourage people to respond to Christ's love in this way will help to open up the wellsprings of Christ's Heart for the salvation of many people.

St. Margaret Mary left in her writings an account of Christ's Promises for persons devoted to his Sacred Heart. Among these promises: "Sinners shall find ... [an] infinite ocean of mercy. Tepid souls shall become fervent. Fervent souls shall quickly mount to high perfection.... Those who shall promote this devotion shall have their names written in my Heart, never to be effaced."

As you move on from this retreat, encourage others to find in union with the Heart of Christ the key that opens the way to a new relationship to God and to the people whose lives they touch.

### **LINKED PASSAGES**

#### **"THE IMITATION OF CHRIST"**

*The Imitation of Christ* is a small book of spiritual reflections written by a Flemish monk, Thomas a Kempis, over 500 years ago. It has been a favourite source of inspiration for devout Christians and is a good companion volume to read and reflect on during this retreat. A typical passage, from Book II, Chapter 11, is the following:

Many follow Jesus in the breaking of bread, but few follow him to the drinking of the chalice of his Passion. Many venerate his miracles, but few follow him in the ignominy of the cross. Many love Jesus as long as they do not meet with any adversity. Many praise him and bless him, as long as they receive consolation from him. But if Jesus hide himself and abandon them for a little while, they either complain or fall into excessive discouragement.

*The Imitation of Christ* is available in a number of editions. The above passage is quoted from the 1998 edition of *The Bombay St. Paul Society*, published by St. Pauls, Bandra, Mumbai 400 050, India.

## **“HAUREATIS AQUAS”**

(May 15, 1956)

### **ENCYCLICAL LETTER OF POPE PIUS XII ON DEVOTION TO THE SACRED HEART**

*“Haureatis aquas”* are the first words of the Latin text of this significant document. They are the beginning of a quotation from the prophet Isaiah 12/5: “You shall draw water with joy from the Saviour’s fountain.” In this letter, Pope Pius writes:

It is altogether impossible to enumerate the heavenly gifts which devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus has poured out on the souls of the faithful, purifying them, offering them heavenly strength, rousing them to the attainment of all virtues. ... We are perfectly justified in seeing in this same devotion ... a gift without price which our divine Savior ...imparted to the Church. (Introduction, #2)

A copy of the English version of this encyclical, from which the above quotation is taken, can be obtained from the Sacred Heart Publication Center, 1730 South Bumby Avenue, Orlando, Florida 32806, USA.

## **THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN**

### **PROLOGUE**

(John 1/1-18)

In the beginning was the Word;  
the Word was in God’s presence,  
and the Word was God.  
He was present to God in the beginning.  
Through him all things came into being,  
and apart from him nothing came to be.  
Whatever came to be in him, found life,  
life for the light of men.  
The light shines in the darkness,  
a darkness that did not overcome it.

There was a man named John sent by God,  
who came as a witness to testify to the light,  
so that through him all men might believe  
but only to testify to the light,

for he himself was not the light.  
The real light which gives light to every man  
was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and through him the world was made,  
yet the world did not know who he was.  
To his own he came,  
yet his own did not accept him.  
Any who did accept him  
he empowered to become children of God.

These are they who believe in his name—  
who were begotten not by blood, nor by carnal desire,  
nor by man's willing it, but by God.

The Word became flesh  
and made his dwelling among us,  
and we have seen his glory:  
the glory of an only Son coming from the Father,  
filled with enduring love.

John testified to him by proclaiming:  
“This is he of whom I said,  
‘The one who comes after me ranks ahead of me,  
for he was before me.’”

Of his fullness we have all had a share—  
love following upon love.

For while the law was given through Moses,  
this enduring love came through Jesus Christ.  
No one has ever seen God.  
It is God the only Son, ever at the Father's side,  
who has revealed him.

## PSALM 8

O Lord, our Lord,  
how glorious is your name over all the earth!  
You have exalted your majesty above the heavens.  
Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings  
you have fashioned praise because of your foes,  
to silence the hostile and the vengeful.

When I behold your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars which you set in place—  
What is man that you should be mindful of him;  
or the son of man that you should care for him?

You have made him little less than the angels,  
and crowned him with glory and honor.

You have given him rule over the works of your hands,  
putting all things under his feet:  
All sheep and oxen,  
yes, and the beasts of the field,  
The birds of the air, the fishes of the sea,  
and whatever swims the paths of the seas.  
O Lord, our Lord,  
how glorious is your name over all the earth!

### PSALM 139

O Lord, you have probed me and your know me;  
you know when I sit and when I stand;  
you understand my thoughts from afar.  
My journeys and my rest you scrutinize,  
with all my ways you are familiar.  
Even before a word is on my tongue,  
behold, O Lord, you know the whole of it.  
Behind me and before, you hem me in  
and rest your hand upon me.  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,  
too lofty for me to attain.

Where can I go from your spirit?  
from your presence where can I flee?  
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I sink to the nether world, you are present there.  
If I take the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
Even there your hand shall guide me,  
and your right hand hold me fast.  
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall hide me,  
and night shall be my light"—  
For you darkness itself is not dark,  
and night shines as the day.  
[Darkness and light are the same.]

Truly you have formed my inmost being;  
you knit me in my mother's womb.  
I give you thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made;  
wonderful are your works.  
My soul also you knew full well;  
nor was my frame unknown to you  
When I was made in secret,  
when I was fashioned in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes have seen my actions;  
in your book they are all written;  
my days were limited before one of them existed.

How weighty are your designs, O God,  
how vast the sum of them!  
Were I to recount them, they would outnumber the sands;  
did I reach the end of them,  
I should still be with you. . . .

Probe me, O God, and know my heart;  
try me, and know my thoughts;  
See if my way is crooked,  
and lead me in the way of old.

## **THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

### **CHAPTER 15**

The tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear him,  
at which the Pharisees and scribes murmured,  
“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”  
Then he addressed this parable to them:  
“Who among you, if he has a hundred sheep  
and loses one of them,  
does not leave the ninety-nine in the wasteland  
and follow the lost one until he finds it?  
And when he finds it, he puts it on his shoulders in jubilation.  
Once arrived home, he invites friends and neighbors in  
and says to them,  
‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’  
I tell you, there will likewise be more joy in heaven  
over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous people  
who have no need to repent.

“What woman, if she has ten silver pieces and loses one,  
does not light a lamp and sweep the house in a diligent search  
until she has retrieved what she lost?  
And when she finds it, she calls in her friends and neighbors to say,  
‘Rejoice with me! I have found the silver piece I lost.’  
I tell you, there will be the same kind of joy before the angels of God  
over one repentant sinner.”

Jesus said to them: "A man had two sons.  
The younger of them said to his father,  
'Father, give me the share of the estate that is coming to me.'  
So the father divided up the property.  
Some days later this younger son collected all his belongings  
and went off to a distant land,  
where he squandered his money on dissolute living.  
After he had spent everything, a great famine broke out in that country  
and he was in dire need.  
So he attached himself to one of the propertied class of the place,  
who sent him to his farm to take care of the pigs.  
He longed to fill his belly with the husks that were fodder for the pigs,  
but no one made a move to give him anything.  
Coming to his senses at last, he said:  
'How many hired hands at my father's place  
have more than enough to eat, while here I am starving!  
I will break away and return to my father, and say to him,  
'Father, I have sinned against God and against you;  
I no longer deserve to be called your son.  
Treat me like one of your hired hands.'  
With that he set off for his father's house.

"While he was still a long way off,  
his father caught sight of him and was deeply moved.  
He ran out to meet him, threw his arms around his neck,  
and kissed him. The son said to him,  
'Father I have sinned against God and against you;  
I no longer deserve to be called your son.'  
The father said to his servants:  
'Quick! Bring out the finest robe and put it on him;  
put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet.  
Take the fatted calf and kill it. Let us eat and celebrate,  
because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life.  
He was lost and is found.' Then the celebration began.

"Meanwhile, the elder son was out on the land. As he neared the house  
on his way home, he heard the sound of music and dancing.  
He called one of the servants and asked him  
the reason for the dancing and the music.  
The servant answered: 'Your brother is home,  
and your father has killed the fatted calf  
because he has him back in good health.'  
The son grew angry at this and would not go in;  
but his father came out and began to plead with him.

"He said to his father in reply:  
'For years now I have slaved for you.  
I never disobeyed one of your orders,  
yet you never gave me so much as a kid goat to celebrate  
with my friends.

Then, when this son of yours returns  
after having gone through your property with loose women,  
you kill the fatted calf for him.’

“‘My son,’ replied the father, ‘you are with me always,  
and everything I have is yours.  
But we had to celebrate and rejoice!  
This brother of yours was dead and has come back to life.  
He was lost, and is found.’”

### **THE WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY**

(John 8/1-11)

At daybreak [Jesus] reappeared in the temple area; and when the people started coming to him, he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees led a woman forward who had been caught in adultery. They made her stand in front of everyone. “Teacher,” they said to him, “this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. In the law, Moses ordered such women to be stoned. What do you have to say about this case?” (They were posing this question to trap him, so that they could have something to accuse him of.)

Jesus bent down and started tracing on the ground with his finger. When they persisted in their questioning, he straightened up and said to them, “Let the man among you who has no sin be the first to cast a stone at her.” A second time he bent down and wrote on the ground. Then the audience drifted away one by one, beginning with the elders.

This left him alone with the woman, who continued to stand there before him. Jesus finally straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where did they all disappear to? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she answered. Jesus said, “Nor do I condemn you. You may go. But from now on, avoid this sin.”

### **THE ANNUNCIATION**

(Luke 1/26-37)

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David.

The virgin’s name was Mary.

Upon arriving, the angel said to her:

“Rejoice, O highly favored daughter! The Lord is with you.  
Blessed are you among women.”

She was deeply troubled by his words,  
and wondered what his greeting meant.

The angel went on to say to her: “Do not fear, Mary.

You have found favor with God.  
You shall conceive and bear a son and give him the name Jesus.  
Great will be his dignity and he will be called Son of the Most High.  
The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father.  
He will rule over the house of Jacob forever  
and his reign will be without end.”

Mary said to the angel, “How can this be since I do not know man?”  
The Angel answered her: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you  
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you;  
hence, the holy offspring to be born will be called Son of God.  
Know that Elizabeth your kinswoman has conceived a son  
in her old age; she who was thought to be sterile  
is now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible with God.”

Mary said: “I am the servant of the Lord.  
Let it be done to me as you say.” With that the angel left her.

### **THE MAGNIFICAT** (Luke 1/46-55)

“My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord,  
my spirit finds joy in God my savior,  
For he has looked upon his servant in her lowliness;  
all ages to come shall call me blessed.

God who is mighty has done great things for me,  
holy is his name;  
His mercy is from age to age on those who fear him.  
He has shown might with his arm;  
he has confused the proud in their inmost thoughts.  
He has deposed the mighty from their thrones  
and raised the lowly to high places.  
The hungry he has given every good thing,  
while the rich he has sent empty away.

He has upheld Israel his servant,  
ever mindful of his mercy;  
Even as he promised our fathers,  
promised Abraham and his descendants forever.”

## **THE BEATITUDES**

(Matthew 5/1-12)

“How blest are the poor in spirit: the reign of God is theirs.  
Blest too are the sorrowing; they shall be consoled.  
Blest are the lowly; they shall inherit the land.  
Blest are they who hunger and thirst for holiness; they shall have their fill.  
Blest are they who show mercy; mercy shall be theirs.  
Blest are the single-hearted for they shall see God.  
Blest too are the peacemakers; they shall be called sons of God.  
Blest are those persecuted for holiness’ sake; the reign of God is theirs.  
Blest are you when they insult you and persecute you  
and utter every kind of slander against you because of me.  
Be glad and rejoice, for your reward is great in heaven;  
they persecuted the prophets before you in the very same way.”

## **THE PROMISES OF OUR LORD**

to St. Margaret Mary

for Persons Devoted to His Sacred Heart

1. I will give them all the graces necessary in their state of life.
2. I will establish peace in their homes.
3. I will comfort them in all their afflictions.
4. I will be their secure refuge during life,  
and above all in death.
5. I will bestow abundant blessings on all their undertakings.
6. Sinners shall find in My Heart the source  
and the infinite ocean of mercy.
7. Tepid souls shall become fervent.
8. Fervent souls shall quickly mount to high perfection.
9. I will bless every place in which an image of My Heart  
shall be exposed and honoured.
10. I will give to priests the gift of touching the most hardened hearts.
11. Those who shall promote this devotion shall have their names  
written in my Heart, never to be effaced.
12. I promise you in the excessive mercy of My Heart that My  
all-powerful love will grant to all those who communicate  
on the First Friday in nine consecutive months the grace  
of final penitence; they shall not die in my disgrace  
nor without receiving their Sacraments. My Divine Heart shall  
be their safe refuge in this last moment.

## TEACHING BY PARABLES

1. A perfect parable. Christ was the master storyteller. Think of the story of the Good Shepherd going after the lost sheep or the story of the Prodigal Son (both in Luke 15). Oftentimes he taught with parables. One prime example is the parable of the seed sown by the farmer. (Mt 13/4-9). His listeners were standing on the shore, while he taught them sitting in a boat.

The parable reads: “One day a farmer went out sowing. Part of what he sowed landed on a footpath, where birds came and ate it up. Part of it fell on rocky ground, where it had little soil. It sprouted at once since the soil had no depth, but when the sun rose and scorched it, it began to wither for lack of roots. Again, part of the seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked it. Part of it, finally, landed on good soil and yielded grain a hundred- or sixty- or thirtyfold. Let everyone heed what he hears.”

His hearers enjoy the story, nodding their understanding at every line. But they are puzzled: What is the story about? Why is he telling us this? His disciples asked him about this afterward. He told them he spoke to the crowd in parables because they tended to listen without really hearing what he is saying. They didn’t take the trouble to understand. The disciples must be different. They at least knew his teaching was about the kingdom of God. And they must understand his meaning so they could explain it to others. If the people were curious enough, they too would ask about what it means. Do we take the trouble to understand?

2. Now the explanation. Christ then explains: “The seed along the path is the man who hears the *message about God’s reign* without understanding it. The evil one approaches him to steal away what was sown in his mind. The seed that fell on patches of rock is the man who hears the message and at first receives it with joy. But he has no roots, so it lasts only for a time. When some setback or persecution involving the message occurs, he soon falters. What was sown among briars is the man who hears the message, but then worldly anxiety and the lure of money choke it off. Such a one produces no yield. But what was sown on good soil is the man who hears the message and takes it in. He it is who bears a yield of a hundred- or sixty- or thirtyfold.” (Matt 13/19-23) The disciples nod their understanding.

3. Open to God’s word. The *message about God’s reign* is the word of God. Christ speaks this word in the gospels. We read the word of God in the scriptures, and we hear it proclaimed in church. What happens? Does it fall on good soil? on attentive or inattentive ears? Are we willing to let its meaning sink in? What kind of effect does God’s word have on our lives?

We thank the Lord for explaining the parable to us. Being attentive to God’s word is a prerequisite for the Holy Spirit to inspire our minds and hearts to respond to his message. The good soil Christ speaks of is our readiness to receive God’s word. We ask ourselves if we are characteristically open or if we are blocked by our dissolute lives, our distractions, our inability to listen.

The word of God, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews says, is “sharper than any two-edged sword. . . . It penetrates and divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the reflections and thoughts of the heart.” (Heb 4/12) It can be a powerful,

living, effective force in our lives, if we are willing to listen. With the young lad Samuel, when the Lord was calling him, we must say: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." (1 Samuel 3/9)

**TRUST IN GOD**  
(Matthew 6/26-34)

Jesus said:

"Look at the birds in the sky.  
They do not sow or reap, yet your heavenly Father feeds them.  
Are you not more important than they?  
Which of you by worrying can add a moment to his life-span?  
As for clothes, why be concerned?  
Learn a lesson from the way the wild flowers grow.  
They do not work; they do not spin.  
Yet I assure you, not even Solomon in all his splendor  
was arrayed like one of these.  
If God can clothe in such splendor the grass of the field,  
which blooms today and is thrown on the fire tomorrow,  
will he not provide much more for you, O weak in faith!

"Stop worrying, then, over questions like,  
'What are we to eat, or what are we to drink, or what are we to wear?'  
The unbelievers are always running after these things.  
Your heavenly Father knows all that you need.  
Seek first his kingship over you, his way of holiness,  
and all these things will be given you besides.  
Enough, then, of worrying about tomorrow.  
Let tomorrow take care of itself.  
Today has troubles enough of its own."

**THE LORD HEARS THE CRY OF THE POOR**  
(PSALM 34, selections)

When the afflicted man called out, the Lord heard,  
and from all his distress he saved him. ...  
The great grow poor and hungry;  
but those who seek the Lord want for no good thing. ...  
The Lord has eyes for the just, and ears for their cry. ...  
When the just cry out, the Lord hears them,  
and from all their distress he rescues them.  
The Lord is close to the brokenhearted,  
and those who are crushed in spirit he saves.

## WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE DAYS AHEAD

1. Led by the Spirit. St. Luke the evangelist also wrote the Acts of the Apostles, the history of the first days of Christianity. In both his gospel and the Acts, Luke stresses the powerful activity of the Holy Spirit. We saw his prominent place in the infancy narrative of his gospel (Lk, cc 1-2; see Meditation 8). In the Acts, the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples after nine days of prayer and filled them with his gifts (Acts 2/2-4), he came at the baptism of new Christians (2/38), inspired Peter to speak out boldly before the high priests (4/8), came upon the Christians when they prayed together (4/31), inspired Stephen in his martyrdom (7/55), directed Philip to explain the scripture to the Ethiopian eunuch (8/29-39), filled the spirit of Paul when he was baptized (9/17) and constantly directed Paul in his missionary journeys.

St. Paul speaks of the continuous activity of the Holy Spirit in the work of the Church and the variety of gifts the Spirit inspired in the faithful (1 Cor 12/4-11). The Holy Spirit poured the love of God into the hearts of the faithful (Romans 5/5), Whenever Paul speaks of the activity of the Holy Spirit, he emphasizes that he acts with power.

2. The Spirit at work in this retreat. The Holy Spirit has undoubtedly been active in your spirit during this retreat. As you move on to solidify the results of the retreat in your daily life, you can look confidently to the continuing support and direction of the Holy Spirit. What practical insights have you gained?

1. The Holy Spirit acts with power. He is not for the fainthearted.
2. He lives within you as the third Person of the Trinity. He is always near.
3. He led Jesus throughout his life, he inspired Paul in his daily activity. He is the same Spirit today and he is ready to guide you every step of the way.
4. He has drawn you to the following of Christ and he will keep you loyal to Christ, even in the midst of severe temptation and opposition.
5. He is the Spirit of love. He formed the Heart of Christ and will form your heart in his likeness.

3. Personal courage, zeal in the Church. It will take courage to continue to meditate each day and act like a follower of Christ in the months ahead. The apostles had that courage when they broke open the doors and went out boldly to preach Christ and urge the people to faith and repentance. Paul had the courage to endure the beatings and humiliations of Jews and pagans when he was preaching Christ. This is the strength and endurance you can expect when you rely daily on the powerful support of the Holy Spirit.

You should beg the Holy Spirit to keep the Church responsive to the needs of people all over the world; to help priests, seminarians, religious and married couples to be faithful to their calling and filled with zeal for souls; especially to help the Pope and bishops everywhere; and to give courage and relief to people subject to war, famine, persecution, illness and the effects of dire poverty throughout the world. Christ sent the Holy Spirit to inspire the minds and hearts of his followers, and Christians know that their work is to pray that all people on the face of the earth be saved and come to eternal happiness. We must not fail to invoke the Holy Spirit. He is powerful.

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