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## Encounter:

# Finding God in Our Addictions, Attachments, and Afflictions

Given by Ken Buckle on February 29, 2020 for St. Clare of Assisi Parish

[SLIDE 2] (opening prayer)

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## Introduction to Encountering God in our Addictions, Attachments and Afflictions

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Where is God? Theologians and philosophers and saints discuss and comment on this question. But others of us normal people like you and me sometimes ask this question too. The inquisitive 5-year-old might ask the question to his mother, over and over until mother sends her away to play. The wise 95-year-old may meditate on this question in preparation for the end of his life. Sometimes we seem to be certain about it, like when we see a spectacularly beautiful painted sunrise like the one this morning, or witness the miracle of a small and helpless baby being born...and we say “*God you are great and I experience your presence right here right now, thank you...thank you.*” Other times we are not so sure, like during sadness and frustration of the flooding of Hurricane Harvey or in the agony and pain of a school shooting, and we cry out “*God, where are you? Why have you abandoned us?*” King David asks this question in Psalm 22 (verse 2), and even Christ the King echoes those same words of David the king while dying on the cross on Good Friday (Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46).

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Have you ever felt despair? Have you been discouraged? Are you sometimes irritable? Complaining and full of negativity? Maybe you've felt this for a few days, but maybe you've been living like this for months or years at a time. Over 10 million of us adults in our country struggle with significant depression, and over a million of us think about death as an escape from the pain of depression. Hundreds of thousands of us attempt suicide each year, and 45,000 of us die from our depression and addictions this way, many of them teenagers and elderly. 800,000 die from suicide worldwide each year.

Have you felt worried about anything? Are you afraid some or most of the time? Is the fear of the coronavirus bothering you? Are you nervous around people? Do you avoid certain situations out of fear? In our country there are 40 million adults with significant anxiety. Anxiety is now the biggest issue that brings children, teens, and adults into mental health offices.

Do you struggle with compulsive behavior, doing something over and over habitually and maybe even without thinking? Perhaps you felt like you couldn't resist temptation to eat something, or perhaps some sexual temptation like pornography or masturbation or other sexual behavior. Maybe these behaviors are like self-medication for stress, anger, sadness, loneliness, or boredom. The two biggest addictions in our country today are food and sex, and they are quite destructive. We have an estimated 20-50 million Americans with addictions of various types. Of course, the old addiction to alcohol continues to plague many people. Addiction to marijuana is growing. In recent years we've had an epidemic of people addicted to pills of various types. Cocaine and heroin are still around. Addictions can be mild or severe, and this is true with depression and anxiety. Many of us can relate to a sense of emptiness that we are unable to fill.

The words “addiction” and “mental illness” can be problematic for many people because of the stigma associated with them. Many of us view mental illness or addiction as a moral failing, and so we are quick to pass judgment on ourselves or others. We worry about our weaknesses separating us from others, that they may cause us to be rejected. Most people didn’t ask to have an addiction or mental illness. It just happened. It is not unusual for us to find addictions, mental illnesses, and physical illnesses running in families generation to generation.

Many of us have unhealthy attachments to people, places, and things. Some of us stay in unhealthy relationships, where we are abused or neglected, and sometimes we are the ones doing the abuse or neglect to the other person. We feel like we can’t stop or end the relationship. Maybe we feel trapped. Maybe we’re working too much, to avoid other discomforts in life. Maybe we are too attached to exercise or working out, preoccupied with our bodies or physical appearance. We might have an unhealthy attachment to the news, or to social media, or to driving too fast. People, places, or things. We might realize that these are unhealthy attachments when these people, places, or things are separated from us.

Finally, we probably could agree that we collectively have an anger problem going on in recent years, with more hostility, bullying, divorce, and division than ever before in our history. Politics, religion. I am right, you are wrong...and neither of us will budge. We might even get so angry that we’ll shoot a bunch of people.

Our affliction may be something that someone did to us. We may have experienced childhood abuse or neglect. We may have been a victim of crime. We might have chosen something that turned out to be traumatic when we weren't expecting it. An example of this happens in abortion. In my work, I hear a lot about trauma that people have encountered. It is not unusual for there to be a history of trauma on top of trauma, starting in childhood or teen years and continuing into adulthood. The person may be left afraid, discouraged, reliving the trauma, or trying to keep it buried. It is not uncommon for addictions to develop as a way of keeping trauma numbed out.

There may have been accidents or tragedies of various types, and sometimes we may have not fully recovered from them. We may be left in grief, depression, anxiety, or anger as a result of these accidents or tragedies.

Perhaps our affliction is a physical one. A birth defect, maybe a physical illness. Heart issues, cancer. Diabetes. There can be great suffering in these physical afflictions, significant disruption in life. All of these disrupt enjoyment of life actually: addictions, mental illnesses, unhealthy attachments. All of these can be very costly in financial terms, treatment, bad decisions, and inability to work, and so on. We sometimes lose our families or homes because of the financial costs or emotional stress.

It may be that our situation is that we live with a person who has an addiction, affliction, or some unhealthy attachments. Their issues may create difficulties for us, and we don't know what to do about it. We may have complained repeatedly to them, tried to force them to change or get help, or maybe we have just suffered quietly and patiently. This is a hard place to be in. Sometimes we don't realize how we are harming those around us.

There is such discouragement about all this that many of us wonder: Where is God? Some of us have given up on God. We wonder where He is in all of this. The number of people in our country, especially young people, claiming that they have no religion is quite high right now in our country and in Europe. But listen to this:

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*“Blessed are you who have been humbled.*

*Blessed are you who have a hunger for something more.*

*Blessed are you who are in sadness.*

*Blessed are you who have been bullied.”* (paraphrasing Matthew 5; Luke 6)

I am paraphrasing here the words of Christ from two of his famous sermons. I want to gently suggest three other mysterious blessings that are the subject of our focus today:

[TAP TO DISPLAY EACH]

1. Blessed are you who have found yourself powerless to something of this world, the flesh, or the devil (the three enemies of the soul). In other words, blessed are the weak and broken. Blessed are we who are human.
2. Blessed are you who have a physical or mental illness or disability or physical illness that you cannot deny.
3. Blessed are you who recognize an unhealthy attachment to people, places or things.

Why would such people be blessed? Because in these afflictions we have a special potential to have a close encounter with God of the most miraculous kind. We may have opportunities to find God in a deeper and more transformational way. We don't only find God in the cure, but also in the struggle and in the process of healing.

But one of the problems is that most people live today with no strong focus on God and very little attention to self-examination, and not very much openness to or thoughts about change. Being open to self-exploration is the road less traveled. Because of this, deep change or transformation are extremely rare and difficult. New Year's resolutions are an easy example of how difficult it is to make long-term change. But suffering can wake us up from the place where we are. In suffering we may be forced to step back and consider what is going on with us, and what God might be doing.

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In this sort of wasteland, we sail through life, sometimes blissfully ignorant and pursuing happiness as long as resources permit, and so long as we have others to accompany us. We may operate out of a sense of rebellion ("*I'll show you*") and/or rationalization ("*Everybody is like this*" or "*I'm not so bad*"). In this place of being comfortable, chasing happiness, and "getting ahead no matter who gets hurt" we can also sometimes find ourselves occasionally frustrated, stressed out, and unhappy, feeling full of desires but somewhat empty, yet unable or unwilling to search out a cause or solution. Sometimes when we are kind or do something for others, it may be more for our convenience, for us to feel good about it, for show, or out of a sense of obligation... ultimately superficial or self-serving. There may be fleeting moments of connection with self, God, and others and even a brief recognition that something is amiss, but they usually are short-lived and pass and we return to the usual grind of disconnected life, the daily routine that feels normal to us.

An image of this cycle between normal life and pain, might be like that of a woman in labor having a baby, who experiences the intense pain of contractions that then decrease, but come back again after a while in a repeating rhythm. The scriptures in several places use this image of a woman in labor to illustrate our occasional pain as fallen humans in need of rebirth in the Holy Spirit (see Isaiah 26; Jeremiah 4; Galatians 4). Jesus has this amazing talk with the religious leader Nicodemus about being born again (John 3:1-9). Note that when we are born, the labor pains are over, and we are full of joy and peace and rest...no matter how painful the labor might have been.

Today we live in a place of strong connection to what we see and experience around us, attractions of the senses in the physical body and emotions (“if it feels good, do it” and “whatever I feel or think is what is really important”). We are caught up in life in the mostly godless culture, even though we may go to church occasionally or on Sundays. There may be self-preoccupation, usually oriented toward self-promotion, self-soothing, and ego reassurance...to mask or quiet an underlying dissatisfaction with self. We sometimes don’t realize or consider how our behavior affects others. We might make the excuse, “*well I’m not hurting anybody*” but usually this is not the truth.

This is all hard to hear. If somebody points out these things to us, we get angry and deny that there's anything wrong with us. Many years ago, when I was still drinking, I went to a community penance service at our parish for Advent. There were many visiting priests I did not know. I was in line for an old retired priest. When it was my turn, I confessed that I had lost my temper with my young nephew at our family Thanksgiving party, because I had gotten drunk. He asked me if I was an alcoholic but there wasn't much time for counseling with the long lines, so he gave me absolution and I went on my way. I was furious. I said to myself: "*How could he know me?*" We don't like it when we get convicted. There may be many resentments and fears.

People in the wasteland are not usually taking any action toward change, although they may have in the past, and they may be or feel stuck in their plight. We humans are often reluctant and resistant to change, even when life is full of all sorts of problems. We unfortunately have the potential to go a whole lifetime like this. Our ego or pride gets in the way, as mine did with my drinking. We may blame religion or the government or other people like our parents. There may be a resignation, a sense that there is no way to pull out of the mess. In this desert space, joy and gratitude are usually not found very often. In this place, people may be self-sabotaging, self-destructive, self-harming, and in the worst scenario may be in depression or despair, which Soren Kierkegaard described as "*the sickness leading to death.*"

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So where is God? God is here, always. He is always there in good times and bad times, even in this wasteland. This is really Good News. Sometimes it is difficult to find God in our suffering, like the great prophet Elijah, who was hiding out in a cave wishing to die because of his problems. Elijah had trouble finding God around him in the strong and violent winds that were tearing down the mountain and crushing rocks, and Elijah had difficulty experiencing God in the earthquakes He was not able to find God in the fires. Strangely enough, the scriptures tell us that Elijah encountered God's presence in a small, still sound (1Kings 19:9-12). St. Paul says that when our weaknesses, sins, and brokenness abound, grace abounds even more (see Romans 5:20). St. Paul hears the voice of Jesus reassuring him: "*my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness...for when you are weak, then I am strong in you* (2 Corinthians 12:9-10)." Theologians explain for us that God's presence is everywhere, all the time, in everything. In Psalm 139 (7-12) we hear these hauntingly beautiful words:

*"Where can I go from your spirit? From your presence, where can I flee? If I ascend to the heavens, you are there; if I lie down in the land of the dead, you are there. If I take the wings of dawn and dwell beyond the sea, even there your right hand holds me fast. If I say, 'surely darkness shall hide me, and night shall be my only light' – I find that darkness is not dark for you, and night shines as the day. Darkness and light are but one."*

God is present and active, pure action, moving, suspending and conserving everything in an uninterrupted process of creation. He is present in us, and in our every experience of joy or of pain...and that is our focus today, to be able to find and encounter Him even in difficult times and all throughout our healing and recovery process. This is meant to reassure us, and also to challenge us.

Today as we talk about some different places each of us may be in life and how we may encounter God in them, we are mixing psychological and spiritual growth and maturation. Theologians tell us that God's supernatural grace perfects our human nature and brings it to fulfillment, including our emotional or psychological nature which are part of what it means to be human. So, I see the psychological and spiritual as closely connected.

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We will also consider on each topic today how the Holy Spirit and our Guardian Angel may operate to help us find God and move into a closer encounter with Him, but we'll also consider how some unholy spirits may try to interfere to keep us in distress and from encountering God. These two aspects of the spiritual life may be of interest to you, since we don't talk about the action of the spiritual world very much today. These holy and unholy spirits are real, but we may not recognize the evidence seen occasionally when people are overcome by these holy and unholy spirits. For example, we see people filled with the Holy Spirit do some amazing things, in the scriptures as the disciples did at Pentecost and in the lives of the saints, and in the lives of good people all around us in today's world. We also see people prompted by evil unholy spirits do some shocking and troubling things, both in the scriptures and in the news every day. This is not meant to frighten you or make you paranoid, but to help you see more clearly what is going on. Good and evil coexist.

In fact the readings for this weekend, the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent, address the presence of evil in our midst, first with Adam and Eve (Genesis 2), and then with Jesus during His temptation in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11). In the second reading St. Paul demonstrates that Jesus in obedience fixes what Adam damaged through disobedience (Romans 5:12-19).

### How or where the demonic may interfere:

So in this desert wasteland I described that predominates in our world today, psychological defenses and spiritual attacks cause us to remain in denial: cut-off from self and away from God, stubborn and closed in heart, mind, and spirit, and sometimes with a lack of true intimacy with others. This is the playground of the demonic.

Our addictions or strong attachments may have developed because in our pain we experienced something extremely pleasurable something that stimulated our curiosity: might be something physical, or perhaps an overpowering emotional experience. So we were drawn back to it, over and over until a habit is developed. It could be a substance or a TV series, a new friend or a new cell phone app. Perhaps in the beginning we weren't even thinking about it, but now we can't leave it alone. Over time we're hooked. We might be very careful with anything we notice as extremely pleasurable. It would be a grave temptation.

When we find ourselves being stubborn about something, not being able to let go of an opinion, strong belief, a feeling, or thought, we should be careful because it may be a sign that our willfulness is activated. The work of grace and the Holy Spirit are somewhat but not completely restricted by our own misaligned free will and the life we are trying to live apart from God. The world offers so many distractions and noise that keeps us from being connected with God, self, and others.

The demonic may tempt the person to remain selfish and false or fake. The false selves are (1) when we focus too much on material things, tying our identity to things that we possess like cars and houses. In the temptation of Christ in the desert, Jesus refuses to turn stones into bread in order to avoid this type of false self. (2) A second area of false self is when our identity is too attached to what we do, like with our jobs or good actions. In the temptation of Christ, Jesus avoids this type of false self when He refuses to impress people by jumping down from the top of the temple. (3) A third area of false self is when we tie our identity to what people think of us, to power or status. In the temptation of Christ, He refuses to take this type of false self by showing no interest in being put over all the kingdoms of the world. These false selves cover over our true self that is not attached to any of these things, and evil prefers that we stay locked into these false selves because they interfere with our freedom to get healthy and love others.

The desert wasteland I've been describing in this introduction section is the vast territory of demonic forces, which mainly work to keep us here in this unthinking and lonely place and tempts us to find others to join in with us in our misery. Misery loves miserable company. This is true for humans and interestingly enough is also true in the spirit world. The forces of evil are largely satisfied with us being in this desert of denial because there is not much threat of losing the person to God as we are already somewhat disconnected from God, from self, and from others. We can think of this as being in a state of being trapped in pride, ego, and self-will...and these are psychological states that our spiritual enemy likes to take advantage of. They keep us far from real, transformational change.

### How or where the Holy Spirit may intervene:

But don't despair. Let me tell you about the Holy Spirit that is more powerful than these unholy spirits. Our God in Jesus became small and weak, so that he might elevate to glory those of us who feel small and weak. If we are having great difficulty living this way (struggling to make it, becoming tired of propping up the false selves that depend on what we have, what we do, and what others think of us), the Holy Spirit may encourage us to desire a departure from the wasteland, and may nudge others around us into action. The Holy Spirit may stir up in us a desire to depart from Egypt for the Promised Land (see Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). We will talk more about this after the break. Here's a preview:

In my experience with people suffering from addictions, illnesses, or unhealthy attachments...it is common that family or friends, pastors, or others may be praying for us as they see us struggling without making much progress. These prayers are important and powerful. Prayer does work. It may be the only thing they can do sometimes for us when we are lost in the desert. Sometimes when others have talked with us and given us recommendations which we are not following, prayer is the only action left that they can take. In this place of suffering, we may have brief moments of begging God for mercy when we are miserable, short-lived periods of self-reflection. God hears these prayers and is always reaching out to us, waiting and watching. Despite being pounded by life's unexpected challenges or being stuck in difficulties that we may even be creating ourselves; our Guardian Angel is quietly offering us some protection. The Holy Spirit will continue to knock on our door occasionally, making little invitations to wake up, and sending certain people into our lives to assist. Openness and humility are the pathway out of our humiliation.

There were hermits and monks in the early Christian church (The Desert Fathers) who intentionally moved away from the basic security and pleasures of usual life to be in the wasteland as a means of finding God for spiritual growth and development. God is there in the desert wasteland. St. Anthony the Great of Egypt began this movement. Others were St. John Cassian, St. Macarius, and St. Evagrius Ponticus. People sometimes followed them there into the desert to learn from them. Today we start in the wasteland to discover the wisdom, mercy, and love of God who is there with us, but we will move into new territory of hope.

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The next three sessions will cover ways in which we may encounter God in our addictions, unhealthy attachments, and afflictions of body, mind, heart, and spirit. Each of the three sessions will focus on three different aspects, so altogether today I'll be talking about nine different ways we may encounter God amid our afflictions and in our recovery from them. In the spirit of Lent, I invite you to openly consider where or how you may be living as I describe these various places. You may find some elements of different places that fit for you, and that's okay. You may also find that you are in different places on different issues. That's okay also. Each area of progress builds on prior progress, so they do unfold in a certain order in my experience. We might find that we've made progress and slipped back into other area.

This information is not completely new in the world of psychology. It just may be that the way I'm presenting it is somewhat new to you. I don't claim that this is any new super theory or therapy. I am actually borrowing from a variety of sources as I describe these aspects of encounter and growth, and I will list them for you at the end. This material is simply a way to reflect on where you are, where you might want to be, and how to get there. This has been what I experience in my work as a psychologist, and what I've found in my own personal journey. I am constantly learning and readjusting my views on these things as I go through my life and my work, still figuring it out just like you. I believe that the holy season of Lent is a good time for us to reflect on these issues.

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## Presence and Encounter:

In the remaining three sessions, we'll be considering how we may encounter God's transformational grace, mercy, and love. As we finish this introductory session, we might touch briefly then on the concepts of presence and encounter. I want to mention for your additional study, an excellent book by one my early mentors, Canadian psychologist Dr. David Benner, who is Anglican Catholic now in his senior years. His book "Presence and Encounter: The Sacramental Possibilities of Everyday Life" is well worth reading. I also want to make mention here of Cardinal Sarah's great book on silence. Both of these are especially good for reflection during the holy season of Lent.

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Dr. Benner defines presence as the awakening that calls us into an engagement or encounter with something in the present moment. This is a real connection. It is a sort of stopping to smell the roses, whether it involves nature, God, another person, or our own self.

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St. Paul (Ephesians 5:14) says "*awake, o sleeper, arise from your sleep...Christ is calling you.*" He speaks from his own experience, his dramatic encounter with the risen Jesus. Encounter invites awakening. Being present to anything requires an openness, a self-sacrifice.

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It is difficult to be present to anything or to God if we are not able to be present with our own self. Sometimes people complain to me that they are afraid or uncomfortable being alone, quiet with themselves...that they must have some distraction or activity going on all the time. I encourage them to work on that, to gradually become present to themselves as a means of progress to becoming present to anything else, including God.

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The world of technology from the time of movies then TV and now the Internet has allowed for quick and relatively easy connection to others. In technology we can be overwhelmed with these superficial connections. These connections rarely involve real presence and encounter. We are focusing on presence and encounter today, because real and deep transformation cannot happen without presence and encounter. We are engaged in this study as a group, and God is present with us here in this place today because we gather in His Holy Name. He says “*Whenever two or more are gathered in my name, I am there* (Matthew 18:20)”.

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At the end of each of our four sessions today, we'll allow for a few minutes in which you may reflect on a few questions and discuss the material in small groups. I'll put them on the screen here for your reference. If you prefer not to be in a small group, that is certainly fine. You can use the time quietly for personal reflection. If you form or enter a small group, there is no requirement that you must talk or share, but please consider that your questions, thoughts and reactions may be very helpful to one of the other people in your small group. This small group time may also allow you to meet and get to know someone whom you didn't know before today. This means that as we talk today about encountering God, you may also have an encounter with your own self, as well as with others around you. We simply ask you to be present to yourself or to the small group discussion for a brief period. We practice being present to our own self, to others, and to God in very similar ways. If you don't like my questions or come up with better ones, please feel free to disregard them and go with your own.

On this schedule I want to mention that after lunch I'll give a very brief commercial for Gratia Plena, the organization I am connected with in my work. I'll also give away three books in a drawing, if you want to put your name in the hat by filling out one of these forms. You do not have to make a donation. If you want to sign up for our monthly newsletter, you can write "newsletter" on the card with your name and email address.

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Questions for Reflection at the end of Session One:

1. What is the evidence of difficulties in my past?
2. What dissatisfactions do I have in my life today?
3. What is keeping me from venturing out of the wasteland?

## Session 2: the 1<sup>st</sup> Trio

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1. Noticing (our difficulties)

[SLIDE 20]

(read the conversion of Saul in Acts 9:1-22)

What in the world is happening here? A man goes from murdering Christians and throwing them in jail as heretics, to completely stopping that old behavior, and bringing non-believers to Christ. This is a remarkable transformation in the span of just a few days. Note the language here: “*Paul was unable to see and neither ate nor drank*” and “*things like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight...and was baptized.*” Ananias also had a conversion here, as he was greatly afraid of Paul but then cooperated with God to bring healing to Paul, referring to him as “brother.” These kind of conversions still happen today, to people just like you and me.

Sometimes a strong confrontation may bring it about, like the kind that Jesus used with Saul. Sometimes a strong confrontation does not work, because the person is not open or cannot see. We might suddenly realize that our actions or behaviors are harming others. It is hard to know when the Holy Spirit may break through.

Occasionally one person will bring in another person to our office who doesn't really want to be there. The person may or may not be able to benefit from the discussion. One time a woman came to see me whose husband was drinking too much. After meeting with her for a while, I asked her to try to convince him to come in with her, and so he finally did. The sessions were difficult and it didn't seem like we were getting anywhere. After a contentious session that seemed like a disaster, they didn't come back for a few weeks. Then she showed up for a meeting with me alone again. She said that after that last session, when they got into the car in the office building parking lot, he broke down crying and they had a good talk. She said that after that he was a changed man. You just never know when someone may finally notice what is going on with them.

When we can notice our difficulties in a sincere way and hold them in our awareness and attention for a while, we are having an encounter with our own self that is beginning to lead us out of the wasteland. The Holy Spirit is at work in our noticing, and so this self-awareness can be considered a sacred event and a significant breakthrough. When we begin to see the issues in ourselves in need of healing or transformation, we are beginning to courageously overcome our defensive response of the past that had ignored them, minimized them, and so on. It is not unusual for us to discover that we have been trying to make it on our own without God or the help of anyone else. Let me give you a brief example of this.

A few years ago, a pastor of a church came to see me for a one-session consultation. He described that a particular issue had divided his congregation, and he was very discouraged about it because he was not able to bring the flock back together. In the midst of his suffering over this, he had fallen into some pornography use as a result. I think of this as a form of self-medication that doesn't work very well. The most important part of his story was that he felt like a failure and was considering leaving the ministry. He recognized that the stress was taking a huge toll on him. It takes a lot of courage to self-examine and seek help. This was a good pastor, truly a man of God who loved Jesus, and whose heart was broken over the conflict at his church. I really felt his pain.

After listening carefully to his story for some time, I apologized to him for what I was about to ask him, not wanting to offend him. I simply asked if he had invited God to help him in the midst of these difficulties, the division in his church and his personal struggle with pornography. He sat there quietly in silence for a few moments, reflecting. He then admitted that he had been so focused on the divisive issue, and begging God to fix that problem in his church or show him how to do it, that he had forgotten to ask God to help him personally with his distress over it. He admitted that it was an oversight, pretty silly for a pastor, and so we had a good laugh over it. It is extremely healthy for us to laugh at ourselves. We talked a while longer about what he planned to do, and then he went on his way.

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There is something about noticing that involves reading the signs. Many figures in the scriptures were able to read the signs inside themselves and around them. The prophets of the Old Testament are famous for this, especially John the Baptist in the New Testament gospels who pointed out Jesus to people who didn't know him. Noah was another figure who read the signs. In the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent, we are reminded to "*wake up*" and not be caught in the flood of living life without God. I learned from Hurricane Harvey that floods are tricky, because when the waters rise, we might think or hope that they won't get too high. We don't usually have a way of knowing how high the floodwaters are going to go, and so we might not seek shelter. However, the flood might become so serious that we can't any longer deny the danger and leave the area.

This territory is referred to as "noticing" because of a simple or basic awareness of our need for healing and recovery. It is often an increased amount of pain and suffering that stirs the person into self-examination or life-examination. The person may be able to see a pattern or trail of problems, crises, or failures. The person may recognize the three-fold relationship impairments: God, self, and others. There may be anger and resentment toward God, but it can be strong or weak, and the person may not understand why or how this developed, usually long ago. Still, the person may be drawn back to church or prayer because of suffering. Discouragement, despair, and doubts may predominate. The person may be able to see that there were traumas or wounds in the past, but not knowing what to do about it. If we do something that harms others, they might call it to our attention, and this might shake us out of our denial. Others may help us to see our faults that we don't see, like if we had a cut on our forehead and a kind person says to us: "*Hey look, you're bleeding there.*" My wife does that for me because with no hair I bump and nick my head often and the wound is obvious to her because there is nothing to hide it. After she tells me, I go look in the mirror.

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St. Augustine in his excellent book Confessions about his amazing conversion, describes

*“You took me from behind my own back, where I had placed myself because I did not wish to look upon myself. You stood me face to face with myself, so that I might see how foul I was, how deformed and defiled, how covered with stains and sores. I looked, and I was filled with horror, but there was no place for me to flee to away from myself. If I tried to turn my gaze from myself, he still went on with the story that he was telling, and once again you placed me in front of myself, and thrust me before my own eyes, so that I might find out my iniquity and hate it. I knew what it was, but I pretended not to; I refused to look at it and put it out of my memory.”*

(p.157)

The story of St. Augustine’s transformation is one of the greatest conversions of all time. His mother, St. Monica, prayed intently for a long time for Augustine’s conversion.

To help facilitate this action of noticing with many of those who seek my help, I sometimes encourage them to write out the story of their affliction, addiction, or unhealthy attachments. It does take courage. I challenge them to go back to when and where these difficulties started. For alcoholics, this might look like: when did you first know about alcohol, when did you see others using it, and then when did you use it yourself. I ask them to record the negative consequences that have come up from their drinking. I challenge them to try to recall the thoughts and feelings about it at the time, and how it feels now as they reflect on those old memories. As they write, more and more memories and emotions come up, and the scales begin falling from their eyes.

### How or where the demonic may interfere:

What sometimes happens is that we notice what's wrong in us (and sometimes are horrified or anxious about it), but then close ourselves up with walls and avoid dealing with it. We return to the wasteland, the previous place that is occupied by resignation, resistance, rebelliousness, reluctance, or rationalizing. While noticing, we might backtrack into the wasteland of inaction...and this takes us further away from healing and transformation. Evil influences are happy about this retreat.

Another demonic temptation might be present in our defensiveness: to keep our minds and hearts closed, to have us dig in our heels in stubborn pride, to keep us afraid of looking in the mirror, and even to cause us to blame others for our faults and failings. Another temptation is in the other extreme: to overdo the self-accusations and then to fall into despair over the wreckage of our lives. The key here is to have some balance as we notice what has been happening in our lives...to just be an observer of it for now.

### How or where the Holy Spirit may intervene:

First, the Holy Spirit assists in this place by illuminating the truth so that the person may honestly see, and it is usually a painful truth. We might conclude that our addictions, afflictions, and unhealthy attachments have had more power and impact on our lives than we like. This is true and good but may be shocking to us also. I like to remind people: "Take courage, Jesus is calling you (Mark 10:49)." The Holy Spirit puts the light of truth in front of us.

Second, awareness is the key to getting out of the wasteland desert of the introduction section that I previously outlined. Awareness to something often begins in the body. One of the things that prompted me to stop drinking was the stomach problems I was having. When I was forced to examine my stomach issues, it pointed the way to my seeing how much I was really drinking. Sometimes if we want to understand what is happening to us, we listen to our body. Why am I having these headaches? Why are my dreams so disturbing? Listen to your body, as it is part of what it means to be human.

Third, the Holy Spirit may clear space and time for us to think. Our world is such a busy and active place that not thinking is common. Noticing involves thinking and reflecting. This is why we are giving you some time for reflection and discussion at the end of each segment today, and a time for Adoration before Mass at the end of the day. The Holy Spirit provides us with these opportunities in various and mysterious ways, and it is up to us to use them and not pass them by.

Finally, we have multiple references in the Scriptures of God “opening” things up. In some of the miracles of Jesus scriptures describe how he opens the eyes of the blind and opens the ears of the deaf. Another example occurs after the Crucifixion and Resurrection, on the road to Emmaus, when Jesus is explaining the scriptures to the two disciples who were leaving Jerusalem (Luke 24:45) “opening their minds” to the point that they ran all the way back to Jerusalem. In the book of Acts (16:14) we read about Lydia “opening her heart” to hear what St. Paul was preaching. In noticing these things about ourselves, we thus also are having an encounter with the Holy Spirit who is doing the focusing of our attention and tearing down the walls, opening us up. Be open.

## 2. Searching (for answers)

[SLIDE 23]

After we see enough evidence of weakness, faults, and failures in ourselves from the process of noticing, we might be moved because of the discomfort to want to do something about it. It might be a healthy sense of guilt. Yes, guilt can be healthy. It can prompt us into action for change. This push or kick is a sign of God's grace, love, and mercy. There is something inside us that longs for more, a desire for healing that keeps us restless. We sometimes experience it as a quest, a search. We might not know where to go or what to do. Perhaps it may stay quiet at times or gets obscured in the day to day busyness of our activities and the noise of the world. But it doesn't seem to go away. It remains there, even if we attempt to ignore or deny it. We keep coming back to it.

[SLIDE 24]

This restlessness though can become overwhelming. If we feel like we're drowning or if we are getting tired of treading water, we may look around us for something to hold on to, or some way to get ashore. The person in this place is thinking more and more about what to do because of the problem, that something must change. Initially the person is seeking solutions and healing but doesn't have a solid plan yet. This is still mostly a contemplative phase, with some action in the area of investigating options only but not really taking any action for change quite yet. It may involve consulting people we trust, laying it on the line so they can advise us. It is a huge blessing to have somebody in our life who has our back, who can support and advise us, who has our best interest in mind.

Apart from these consultations, time in silence, stillness, solitude in prayer and meditation are particularly helpful here in searching for answers. This is often when people call our office for an appointment.

### How or where the demonic may interfere:

The work of the demonic might be to fill us with fear. It might also tempt us to stall or drag our feet on taking action. We might be tempted to consider options that actually lead away from healing and progress, though sometimes disguised as something good. We might become confused in our planning. For example, the demonic may suggest intense spiritual practices and scrupulosity. The demonic, sometimes through psycho-spiritual interventions, may lead a person to attach its identity to something unholy (like going to a psychic or having a Tarot card reading), but giving the sense that this is progress.

The demonic may suggest short-cuts to change that will ultimately fail but give the person some brief hope. An example of this is the alcoholic who gives up alcohol for Lent and when successful is then sure that they don't have a drinking problem and so they continue drinking when Lent is over.

The demonic might also tempt us to pretend that we are changing just to get others around us off our back who are complaining and criticizing us, and so we tell them our plans to make them think that we are about to take action finally. Another source of evil are the people who doubt us and tell us we can't change, showing no hope in us, those who actually are discouraging us when we might be trying to change.

### How or where the Holy Spirit may intervene:

The work of the Holy Spirit will be to assist with clear thinking and wisdom, to present options and to continue to illuminate and present truth to us. Journaling and time in silence, particularly in Adoration, can be quite helpful in this place. The Holy Spirit may also send us a person we trust who can recommend an approach that would be helpful to us in our affliction. The Holy Spirit may lead us then to a plan for change, so that we may begin taking action in the near future. One of the key elements here is that we may realize that in the past we attempted to run our lives with minimal or no involvement with God, prayer, or the sacraments...and at this point we be drawn to consider changing our “do it yourself” approach.

When I finally admitted to myself my issues with pornography and alcohol, for a while I didn't know what to do. I had been exposed to pornography around the age of 10 or 11 and started drinking around the age of 13 or 14. I had struggled with those issues for over 15 years. At the point when I finally admitted my problem to myself, I had finished my doctoral degree and had been working with women who were compulsive overeaters, and then was helping drug addicts and alcoholics. Yet, I didn't know what to do. When I think back about that, I am truly amazed. I recall that at some point the light bulb went on, and I understood that I needed to do what I was helping my patients to do. I was frequently recommending to them that they get involved with 12-step programs like Alcoholic Anonymous. It just so happened that my next-door neighbor was an elderly woman who was a recovering alcoholic. In fact, she was one of the first women to join AA in Texas. I started spending some time with her. She said: “*I've been waiting for you to come and see me.*” God also says that same thing to us sometimes. I encountered God in her, and in the people sitting in the 12-step meetings.

Those activities of searching and asking questions were the beginning of my recovery process, the beginning of healing and being liberated.

Moses was drawn to the bush on fire that was not burning up (Exodus 3:2-3). He noticed it and studied it. May we too pay attention what burns inside of us, to encounter God there in the noticing, as Moses did. Holy Spirit fill us with your deep and satisfying love.

### 3. Reconciling (with God)

[SLIDE 25]

Part of the process of transformation is to be confronted with the idea that our own best attempts at self-change have ultimately failed. We may experience a great feeling of desperation and desolation here. Sometimes we may notice that we are confessing the same sins over and over again. At some point we may feel like giving up.

We might find ourselves in such a place of great suffering that we reach out for God as the only option left, concluding that He is the only One who can save us. However, we may also realize that our history with God has not been so great. We may have rejected Him or been angry with Him, even blaming Him. Perhaps we have never had a personal relationship with Jesus, and don't really know Him well.

The person having this experience of being drawn back to God may have a profound sense of relief, peace, and love, but also at the same time may feel guilt and shame for the past feelings of frustration with and distance from God. In this place then, the person may be moved to work out wounds, resentments, and anger with God. This important process is frequently overlooked. This is a critical issue. We realize that because God is all good and only wants what is ultimately and eternally good for us, that any distance was ours, not His. We realize that we don't really need to forgive God for anything, but just to be reconciled with Him. We return home as the prodigal son or daughter (Luke 15:11-32). In the Ash Wednesday Mass reading, Paul says "*we implore you, be reconciled to God!*" (2 Corinthians 5:20).

When people first come to meet with me in the office, I nearly always ask about their relationship with God. If that relationship is broken or has never been developed in the first place, then we usually need to begin by getting that repaired or started. People are sometimes very open and up front about their anger with God, but sometimes it is buried. It's not that I want them to be angry with God. I just want them to confront it if it is there. It's more common than you think, because we want to control everything. If things don't go our way, we get angry. If bad things happen to us, we look for somebody to blame. Sometimes when we can't find anybody to blame, we blame God.

[SLIDE 26]

As he was nearing retirement in his advanced age, Fr. Francis Frankovich from the Charismatic Center wrote a simple but powerful little book on the topic of forgiveness. He wanted to address this topic, because his experience during his ministry career was that lack of forgiveness was a huge problem for a lot of people. Now you might think that the book was just about forgiving others. You are partially correct. The last part of the book does deal with that. But the first part of the book examines the need to forgive God. Yes, that's where Fr. Francis starts. The middle part of his book examines forgiving our own self. His view, and I think he is correct, is that we must reconcile with God and forgive self before we can then effectively turn toward forgiving others.

He acknowledges that we might feel angry and frustrated with God and could imagine that we might be faced with having to forgive God. But he asks the reader to consider first if we really need to do this or not. He then leads the reader through a description of evil: how it started and what it was all about at the beginning of human history and up until today. Fr. Francis makes the point that if we understand evil correctly, and if we understand who God really is according to the scriptures and Jesus' acting of sacrifice for love of us on the Cross...then we may reach the conclusion that we don't actually need to forgive God because He isn't the source of our difficulties.

We might then recognize that God is a good Father, who guides and instructs us, and most of all desires a love relationship with us, a close encounter of the supernatural kind. We might realize that He wants nothing more for us than our healing and growth. We might experience that our God ultimately is merciful.

This is really quite important at the beginning, because if we were to embark on a journey of self-examination and change, it simply would be too scary, too painful for us to do it without certainty of God's great love and mercy. So we need this reconciliation with God in order for our transformation to take place, because He has the strongest desire and the greatest power to bring us the healing we so deeply need, and he will love us gently along the way.

A few years ago a priest at the beginning of Lent gave me this book by one of the greatest current scripture scholars in the world, called "*The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Christ's Crucifixion.*" The book is about Good Friday, and the idea that the world experienced an enormous change as a result of what happened to Jesus of Nazareth that day, the day when His apostles and disciples thought His ministry was over and defeated by death. Bishop Wright makes the case that the usual Christian focus on the goal of going off to heaven after death was not the primary purpose of Jesus' death, and that instead the scriptures indicate that the primary movement is heaven coming down to earth. This idea is that we are called to begin living the life of the world to come, now...not after death.

Bishop Wright states that “how we are saved is closely linked to the question of what we are saved for (p. 28).” The suffering of Jesus on the cross was the way of the victory and suffering since that time is also the way of the follower of Jesus (p. 372), that we are the “*rescued rescuers* (p. 365).” As Henry Nouwen expressed it, we are the “*wounded healers*.” Bishop Wright explains that “...*the death of Jesus on the cross on Good Friday, reconciles people to God, generates the renewal of their human vocation* (p.81).” It is central to our healing process and Christian practice. We respond to the love on the cross with love of our own (p. 365) and we’ll talk more about this in the last session this afternoon.

#### How or where the demonic may interfere:

Demonic forces will not be happy about this potential reconciliation with God since their whole battle is to separate us from God, and so there may be attacks to push the person back to the previous place or searching for answers, or even a retreat back into the inaction of the wasteland. Some of the attacks may involve focusing the person’s attention on tragedies happening in the person’s family or in the world: natural and manmade disasters, disease, human trafficking, crime and violence, sexual abuse scandals, et cetera...with the intent that the person might become convinced that God is not present or caring or that His Church is flawed...to stir up more frustration with God. The demonic may also tempt us to believe the lie that our sins are unforgivable, and that God is not present or does not care about us or our world. The demonic may even suggest to us the lie that the devil is more on our side than God is. The demonic may tempt the person to avoid or forget about the Sacrament of Confession since it reconciles us to God, to others, and within our own self. You will have an opportunity for the Sacrament of Reconciliation this afternoon. Don’t be afraid, Jesus is calling you.

### How or where the Holy Spirit may intervene:

The work of the Holy Spirit is to help the person see that God is loving and merciful, and that His role as a Good Father would allow suffering only as a helpful tool to bring about healing and reconciliation with Him, not as a punishment of abuse or neglect. This reconciliation with God has the capacity to be a huge break-through, and it can come in a powerful moment of grace or spiritual experience, as in a retreat or in prayer. It sets the stage or foundation for much of the healing work that will follow. Note that this reconciliation with God comes near the start of the healing process. This may be why many people do not make progress.

[SLIDE 27]

### Questions for Reflection at the end of Session Two:

1. When/how can I outline my history of difficulties, laying out the evidence?
2. Where or how have I been searching for answers? Do I have a plan?
3. Is there anything between me and God that I need to repair or work out?

[SLIDE] 28 “The Angelus”

[SLIDES 29-33]

(brief commercial for Gratia Plena)

(pass out the “friend of GP cards” and have book drawings)

### Session 3: the 2<sup>nd</sup> Trio

[SLIDE 34]

#### 4. Surrendering (to God and others)

[SLIDE 35]

If there are no issues of anger or unforgiveness remaining between the person and God and trust in God is restored or in place, then a natural next step can be to put one’s life and healing process into God’s competent hands and into the hands of others that God may place in our midst to help us. We humans do not like to surrender. It doesn’t feel safe to us, and so trust is a requirement. This is why we need to work out our issues with God first and be reconciled with Him. Surrender to us seems like being weak, being a loser, or giving up. We don’t want to be vulnerable because we are afraid that others will take advantage of us and we’ll get hurt again, burned again. We’re worried that we’d be like the wounded animal in the forest that is singled out for attack by the wolf who is hunting for dinner. Surrendering feels like we’re putting a target on our back.

Surrender and obedience are connected. Obedience grows out of surrender. Our well-being depends on obedience and surrender to God. But often we'd rather stew in our mess than admit defeat. If we surrender in a military battle, we are submitting ourselves to a more superior power, and will have to do what they wish. In a military surrender, we are hoping not to have to fight any longer, to not risk being hurt any longer. It is very common that a person is willing to do this only after a big fight, or during or following great suffering, because it can be so humbling and scary to surrender. In our psychology and spirituality, we might be helped by understanding that surrender to a Higher Power leads not to captivity, but to freedom, to liberation. Surrender sets us free. This is somewhat counterintuitive. It trips up many people.

Sometimes this surrender happens all at once, but sometimes this ability to surrender occurs gradually...even over a span of many years.

(personal testimony to illustrate how suffering may lead to surrender, and that it may need to happen multiple times across the lifespan)

The core of obedience is surrendering one's will and listening to God's will. How do we know it? We can find about what God wants of us in the scriptures, the Word of God. If we have problems with authority figures, it may help us to focus less on obedience, and more on surrendering to love, the love that wants to restore us to God's glory.

We should only surrender absolutely to God, because only He is totally dependable and perfect in His love and healing. Yes, we surrender quite extensively to others in a close relationship, like in marriage...and Hollywood tells fantasy stories about complete surrender to one's soulmate. In real life, total surrender only makes sense with God who is completely trustworthy.

If a person remains in God's love and mercy, then the person begins to understand that God and His rescuers can be trusted enough to engage in the long road to restoration. Because we have not been successful on our own personal change programs in the past, we recognize in humility that we may need the help of others in this process.

[SLIDE 36]

We have images of surrender in the life of Christ. Jesus yields to his Mother Mary at the wedding feast at Cana when she asked him to solve a problem. Jesus allows John to baptize him when it wasn't really necessary. Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. And finally Jesus surrenders His very life for us on the cross. This total and final act of surrender is the greatest example of trust and love, obedience and surrender that we have in the history of the world. Our healing begins with death to self. Sometimes the deep suffering we have experienced makes it easier to die to self. The cross shows us the way to healing.

This surrender does not mean that we become passive and kick back, waiting for God to rain down the miracles upon us. It means that we do some of the work, we take action, while trusting God and allowing others to guide us. It means that we don't necessarily do what we want to do, but what we believe God is calling us to do. We listen to what others tell us and try the approach that worked for them. This requires humility, the turning or tuning down of our pride and ego.

Surrender is difficult because we don't know what may happen. We must be prepared for anything, and there is a sort of adventure in that. It works if we trust God, and believe that He has our best interest in mind.

How or where the demonic may interfere:

Surrender to God is one of the things that evil hates the most. Why? Because it requires humility, the antidote to pride. The demonic likes pride more than anything because it is like our secret little desire to be God. Pride is what tripped up Lucifer in the beginning, and then Adam and Eve.

One work of the demonic is to lead the person to the stubborn belief that self-effort or simple will power is enough to make personal changes, and so the person is led into frustration when those strategies ultimately don't work. Thomas Merton prayed "*O Lord, save us from our own self-improvement projects.*" Merton wants us to acknowledge that we may take action but God's grace is ultimately what heals us.

Finally, the devil may trick us to believe that suicide or other forms of self-destruction are the right way to surrender. It is a clever but deadly trick. Thoughts of suicide sometimes come with deep depression or severe addictions that lead to despair. Any voices we hear telling us that it is good or okay to harm ourselves, those voices are never coming from God. It is a lie to believe that the world or certain people would be better off without us around. Our God is the essence of life-giving love. There are a lot of people being tricked by evil into suicide today.

How or where the Holy Spirit may intervene:

The Holy Spirit encourages us to transform our humiliation into humility, and to join it with the suffering of Jesus on the cross. Healing comes from nothing else except our cooperation with God's grace and cooperation requires surrender to some degree. The Spirit can draw the person to place one's own self into the care of God's competent hands, recognizing that God's grace alone will bring the healing. The Holy Spirit provides the push or nudge to approach the Healer: "*Take courage, He is calling you* (Mark 10:49)." Note in this passage about the healing of the blind man, that other people too are providing Bartimaeus encouragement to approach and surrender to Jesus.

## 5. Examining (the roots of our defects, woundedness, and sin)

[SLIDE 37]

With the groundwork of believing, trusting, surrendering and connecting with God's goodness, care, and mercy, the person can begin an intense and thorough self-examination of conscience and character. The person takes inventory of personal gifts and talents but also basic character flaws that have allowed the weaknesses and failings. Character flaws are things like dishonesty, selfishness, and aggression.

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It is sort of like when we check the refrigerator or pantry in order to prepare for a trip to the supermarket. We see that these vegetables are still good, but that fruit is rotten and needs to be thrown out. We honestly take stock of what we see in ourselves. We might reflect on the positive and negative feedback that others have given us in the past. We don't have to believe or agree with everything that others say to us, but it might be healthy to at least consider it. In this we are having an encounter with our own self.

One time I had to go to a lab for a test. When in the examination room with the technician, he was hooking me up to all these wires, and it was quiet. He was making small talk and came around to asking what I did for a living. I told him that I was a psychologist working in a faith-based nonprofit counseling center. He asked what faith, and I told him that all the counselors were Catholic. He asked why Catholics seem to be so full of guilt all the time. I explained to him that we have a tradition of self-examination so that we can identify where we need to improve. He paused to consider that for a moment, and then said "*if we all did that, the world would be a better place.*" Healthy guilt helps us make a correction in our behavior. There is also unhealthy guilt that is not good for us, but healthy guilt has a good purpose.

One aspect of our lives that we may notice is a sense of being divided in ourselves. People struggling with addictions, mental or physical afflictions, or unhealthy attachments often struggle with secrecy. We feel embarrassed or ashamed of what we experience as foreign or undesirable. We think that if we ourselves reject it, then surely other people will reject us because of these afflictions. The 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Genesis concludes with the statement that the married couple Adam and Eve were “naked without shame” (25). Just a few verses later following the incident with the snake devil, Adam and Eve were hiding in the Garden of Eden. God says to them: “*Where are you?*” They say to God: “*We heard you and were afraid, so we hid ourselves.*” This is a very unpleasant way to live, in the shadows and in hiding.

We present one view of ourselves to others, and we keep another part of ourselves, our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, secret and hidden. We are divided in ourselves. Shame keeps us in the shadows, and we push into the shadow of ourselves anything we reject. Because it is there in the shadows not being addressed, it takes on a power and will usually at some point sneak up and bite us like a snake. We see these stories in the news of the celebrity who had some secret, who got in trouble. It is a big story because we had been so impressed with the money, power, or talent of that person, not knowing what was in the shadows.

In this process of self-examination, we might particularly look at our resentments and frustrations, and our fears. Sometimes writing about these in our journal and praying about them, can be very fruitful. Adoration is an opportunity for us to do this delicate work in the powerful presence of Jesus. Remember, He is our strength, our Rock, and is *“kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion”* (Psalm 103:8). I invite people to make a list of resentments and frustrations and to look at each of them, one by one. Usually they discover that there is a sense of entitlement about something that is causing their resentment. The truth is that we are entitled to nothing. When we understand and accept this, our resentments begin to melt away.

If done correctly, this self-examination may be difficult work and naturally may take some time. A spiritual or psychological guide or close friend may be particularly helpful to give encouragement and to keep the person on track with a balanced view of self and continued movement toward healing. We don't want to get stuck in this process.

The person may be led to make a good Confession based on this self-knowledge and awareness, perhaps the best Confession ever. I am talking about the Sacrament of Confession, not a disclosure to those people we may have harmed. In the past our Confessions with the priest might have been a list of sins, which is good. But what we're talking about here will be deeper and more meaningful. An example might help.  
[SLIDE 39]

*“Bless me Father for I have sinned. I regret and feel badly that I drove my car through a stop sign last week, which is against the law. It is dangerous and I could have harmed myself or someone else, and I need to place a greater value on my life and the lives of others. Underneath this sin and behavior is my entitlement and pride that I think the laws sometimes don’t apply to me. I also thought I could get away with it, which shows my lack of moral character of doing the right thing even when nobody is looking. I also ran the stop sign because I am usually too stressed out and in a hurry, because I place too much importance on other things in my life that really shouldn’t be such a priority over safety, following the laws, and doing the right thing. In place of these character defects I need to learn and develop with God’s help: humility, patience, and fortitude.”*

A confession like this can only be possible if we are looking more deeply at our own selves. Much of the world does not do this. They might not stop to take the time, or they might not want to face what they’ll find. Jesus desires this transformation in us.

(read Luke 18:9-14 about the tax collector and the Pharisee)

The holy season of Lent which we just started this week, is a great time to explore these areas of our character, to take stock of where internally we are in good shape and out of shape. Many churches during this season will have community Penance services, bringing in extra priests to hear confessions of a large crowd. We are encouraged by seeing our brothers and sisters joining in with us for this cleansing and preparation for Holy Week and Easter, the time to celebrate the Resurrection. The priest represents Jesus and His Church, reconciling us with God and the community. Hearing the words of absolution and forgiveness from the priest is psychologically healing and spiritually significant, and we receive protective grace in this moment of encounter of the presence of Jesus at work in this sacrament.

#### How or where the demonic may interfere:

In this place we also find attacks that cause us to focus only on our sin and negative character defects so as to increase our poor self-esteem and despair. We might also be tempted to succumb to shame, a deep feeling about ourselves that is very negative and psychologically harmful. The demonic attacks might also be to lead the person away from self-examination by tempting them to focus on others (*"I'm this way because of that person who harmed me or influenced me"*) or to cause them to get bogged down in the process so that it doesn't move forward, for example being trapped in memories of abuse or other trauma.

#### How or where the Holy Spirit may intervene:

The Holy Spirit assists by the development of real and genuine humility, leading us to truly see and accept our own self as God does with the good, bad, and ugly all mixed up together. The Holy Spirit may also show the person which wounds from the past are still in need of resolution, renouncing, or healing.

The Holy Spirit may remind us of God's power and mercy, especially through the Scriptures and through celebration of the Eucharist or in receiving forgiveness in Confession. We may know this intellectually but we may have forgotten it. It is also possible that we may have known it but not felt it in genuinely our heart. Sometimes people confess the same sin over and over, not feeling forgiven. God loves when we approach Him in repentance and humility, desiring to reconnect. He wants us to trust in and accept His mercy even though we don't deserve it and we think our sins are so large.

[SLIDE 40]

6. Healing (psychologically and spiritually)

[SLIDE 41]

(read the story of the healing of Bartimeaus' blindness in Mark 10:46-52)

After these earlier steps have been completed and our deeper issues identified, the person in this place begins to face old wounds and traumas and character defects with the help of God and others. This may involve Spiritual Direction or professional counseling or close support from a trusted friend or mentor. While the person engages in this healing or recovery process, living a life of grace in the sacraments can be very helpful. Frequent Mass, Confession, and prayer may be necessary for progress to occur. Thoughts, feelings, and behaviors usually do not suddenly change overnight. There are ups and downs along the way, but we may see a general trend of progress if we are diligent and persistently stay with the process and continue to pursue psychological and spiritual healing.

With the foundation in the earlier steps, we are able to specifically seek healing from our addictions, afflictions, and unhealthy attachments when we approach Jesus and He says to us in reply: "What do you want me to do for you?" It might look like this:

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- If we are in the extremes of pride or self-loathing, we practice/pray for humility
- If we are in the extremes of jealousy or cowardliness, we practice/pray for kindness
- If we are in the extremes of greed or wastefulness, we practice/pray for generosity
- If we are in the extremes of aggression or passivity, we practice/pray for patience
- If we are in the extremes of laziness or workaholism, we practice/pray for diligence
- If we are in the extremes of gluttony or starvation, we practice/pray for temperance
- If we are in the extremes of lust or coldness, we practice/pray for chastity/intimacy

[SLIDE 43]

Many of our wounds are emotional and relational and so the solution usually needs to be emotional and relational. If the emotions have been disconnected from the hurtful incidents or situations, we may need to properly reconnect them. If on the other hand we are overwhelmed by the emotions, then we may need to stabilize them. A second step might be to move away from the emotional aspect into a more rational and intellectual study of what happened. We might search for and find a new way of looking at or thinking of what happened to us. The final step in healing these emotional wounds is to forgive. This is an act of the will, not a feeling that is all warm and fuzzy. Forgiveness will not necessarily make us happy and feel okay about what happened to us. Forgiveness doesn't mean that we excuse or forget about what happened. We might not even need to talk with the person or organization or express it to him or her. Forgiveness allows us to let go of what we have felt and understood in a new way.

[SLIDE 44]

The person in humility and awareness can also approach others to ask for forgiveness and to make amends. In many cases there can be reconciliations, but not all. The person can continue knowing that an effort was made, and things were resolved at least on one side. We surrender control over that when we are ready to take that step.

[SLIDE 45]

We approach others to apologize and seek their forgiveness with a similar formula that is used in the Sacrament of Confession: we specifically mention what we have done to harm the other person, and we express our sorrow and regret with genuine remorse. We express a desire never to harm the person again and ask what we might do to make amends for our actions or inactions that harmed the other person. Our changed behavior might be our best amends. We may beg for forgiveness, but we do not expect anything in return for our confession. Whether the other person forgives us or not and wants to continue our relationship is entirely up to the other person. Our job is to reach out and confess our harm and apologize for it and change our behavior going forward.

How or where the demonic may interfere:

The attack of the demonic might be to interfere by creating obstacles and distractions both in prayer, reception of the sacraments, and in the psychological healing process. Evil may try to throw us into confusion and tempt us to give up, that the work is too difficult or time consuming. The demonic may also place a healer into the mix who is not from God, who does more harm than good (a spiritualist, a secular counselor or one who is incompetent, a “friend” or spiritual adviser, et cetera).

How or where the Holy Spirit may intervene:

The Holy Spirit is working actively and intensely in the person’s life at this point when progress and healing are happening. Sometimes fasting and retreats, prayers by priests, and other spiritual remedies such as anointing can be helpful. The encouragement and support of others can be particularly critical in this process. The psychological and spiritual virtue of persistence will be important, as this recovery and restoration may unfold over months and maybe even years.

[SLIDE 46]

Questions for Reflection at the end of Session Three:

1. Have I been able to place myself into God's hands for healing? Is it difficult or easy? Why?
2. Have I ever taken on a deep examination of self: my character defects and assets? Am I ready for this? Do I have a companion to accompany and support me in this? Have I harmed anyone?
3. How would I answer Jesus' question: "What do you want me to do for you?" regarding the healing my afflictions?

## Session 4: the 3<sup>rd</sup> Trio

[SLIDE 47]

### 7. Integrating (shadow selves into the whole self)

[SLIDE 48]

[SLIDE 49]

The gospel of John (1:43-48a) right away describes how Jesus gathered his first disciples. Hear this brief account:

*“The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee, and he found Philip. And Jesus said to him, ‘Follow me.’ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the town of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and told him, ‘We have found the one about whom Moses wrote in the law, and also the prophets, Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth.’ But Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come from Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’ Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, ‘Here is a true Israelite. There is no duplicity in him.’ Nathanael said to him, ‘How do you know me?’”*

God knows us because He created us, and lives in us and with us. If, we attempt to live our lives divided from others, apart from the Creator, the Source of life, and if we are split inside ourselves, then we are duplicitous...divided and cannot find peace. We see this type of internal splitting in mental illness or addiction. This can and needs to be corrected for our spiritual and psychological growth. We can come out of the shadows and into the light of truth.

[SLIDE 50]

Some psychologists and spiritual writers have talked about the shadow self, those aspects of our self that we have rejected and pushed away and hidden even from our own consciousness. These things that we deny take on a power when we don't deal with them. They will haunt us at times and can get us into real trouble and harm others quite deeply. The unconscious shadow aspects of self are expressed sometimes in dreams so we might notice them. Sometimes they are triggered in our reactions to other people, when the very thing we hate in someone else is actually a hidden fear or fault within our own self. This helps us to see what is hidden and cut off. We then need to address it and integrate them into our view of self.

[SLIDE 51]

In a process of healing integration that starts with awareness and examination, we may be prompted here to forgive our own self and to accept our own limitations. Engaging in this process is to express a care or regard of self that is not self-worship and not ego-driven. This process is a result of and an act of love of self that allows us to have greater compassion for and love of others. This is a gradual process or work of attention to all aspects of being human: spiritual, social/relational, intellectual/academic, work, emotions, physical, and so on. Transformation is not possible without this integration. Humility is honestly seeing ourselves: our strengths and weaknesses, the things we like and what we dislike about ourselves. We can learn to accept our entire self, even while we ask for God's healing of our defects. It is not either or, but both and.

[SLIDE 52]

Our God is an integrated Trinity: Father, Son, and Spirit as symbolized by this figure. You might notice this figure on the stone floor the next time you enter the Cathedral in downtown Houston. God contains the perfect integration of love, justice, and mercy.

[SLIDE 53]

Psalm 41:13 *“In my integrity may you support me and let me stand in Your Presence forever.”* Integrity protects us and allows us to shine for others.

How or where the demonic may interfere:

The primary means of spiritual attack here is to keep us divided inside ourselves, to keep us duplicitous through various temptations. The demonic loves us to be divided in ourselves, divided from each other, and divided from God. Division is a sign of the work of the demonic. The demonic may make good use of those aspects of self that we deny and reject. The demonic of course will also seek to maintain self-hatred and frustration. As we work on this, we might miss the target and fall over to the other extreme which is self-worship: too much attention to our own pleasure, too much focus on the body in exercise, nutrition, and so on that may be elements of self-care, but become corrupted through extreme. We need a balance, moderation in self-care, attention to serving others, all of the aspects or dimensions of being human in order to be appropriately integrated.

How or where the Holy Spirit may intervene:

The Holy Spirit provides the grace and fortitude to gradually over time conform our will to God’s will, so that our actions in public and private are mirroring what we feel and experience inside. This may happen quickly or slowly, but it will happen if the person stays connected to grace and is courageous and diligent in therapy or recovery actions. The Holy Spirit is a spirit of unity. You will hear mention of this unity during the celebration of each Mass. One of the important aspects of our gathering together regularly for the Eucharist is to be drawn together. This is what it means to be a Church community. Jesus did not intend our spiritual lives to be an experience of being isolated and individualized. Yes, we have a personal relationship with Him, in others.

## 8. Loving (others)

[SLIDE 54]

When we move some through some of the phases I've described today, through improving our relationship with God and self and finding some healing from addictions, afflictions, and unhealthy attachments, then our attention may turn toward connection or reconnection with others. Because of the progress and groundwork that has been accomplished, genuine encounter, intimacy, and love are possible. This freedom allows the person to be able to enter healed or new relationships with others that may be healthier and protective. An encounter is possible because we are able to move our ego-driven self out of the way to be more fully present to the Other.

We are transformed by God's love, and our love has the power to transform others. This transformational love involves vulnerability and risk. Some of us don't like vulnerability and risk. We worry that we'll be hurt again, rejected, abandoned, let down. As long as we keep up the walls out of fear, we won't be able to fully become immersed in and penetrated with love. The intimacy of a husband and wife is naked and vulnerable. When we examine the crucifix, we see Jesus naked on the cross. Nothing is held back. Intimacy is sharing our own selves with others without pretense, without hiding.

This transformation involves turning away from something else and toward the Source of Love, whether it is the image of Christ we see and encounter in another person, or whether it is an encounter with God Himself. Turning is repentance, not just from something like sin or my own self, but toward something...toward the light.

[SLIDE 55]

The ability to love others, to attend to their needs and respond to them, is based on the foundation of self-sacrifice. We place our interests and needs aside and can now respond to the Other. We can listen to them and see them in a new way that wasn't possible before when we were preoccupied with our issues.

To love is to be filled. When we are lacking love in life, whether giving or receiving, we may feel empty. Jesus wants to fill us with His love in a deeply satisfying way. Recall the woman at the well, and their discussion about the life-giving water that satisfies. He said that this living water will flow from us as well, if we believe in Him (John 7:38). The love of God is life-giving, as is the love of a husband and wife. It is productive and creative. It cannot be contained and limited.

[SLIDE 56]

Jesus is our model for sacrificial love, and we are reminded of this when we examine Him on the cross. St. Paul of the Cross, who founded the Passionists religious order 300 years ago, preached that the Passion and Death of Christ are the greatest proof and example of God's love for us. St. Paul of the Cross is often pictured pointing at the Crucified Jesus. The significance is that love and the cross are tightly integrated.

How or where the demonic may interfere:

The demonic here may seek to pollute love, as for example with pornography or other aspects of sexual immorality attached to love. Pope St. John Paul II said that the problem with pornography is not that it shows too much of a person, but that it does not reveal the depths of the inner person. Finally, evil may place unhealthy people (including family, friends, and newcomers) in the way of our love activity, creating drama and new wounds so that we are distracted from loving others.

How or where the Holy Spirit may intervene:

The Holy Spirit is working to foster real, sacrificial, live-giving love in relationship in this place, genuine care and concern about the other person. The Holy Spirit drives away fear and allows us to let go of fear so that we may love more effectively. Love is the other side of fear.

*1 John 4:18-21: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment, and so one who fears is not yet perfect in love. We love because He first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. This is the commandment we have from Him: whoever loves God must also love his brother."*

## 9. Living (the mission)

[SLIDE 57]

You may know this story. I learned it as a boy from my Sicilian-American mother with her very devout Catholic faith. Young Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone would have been about 18 years old around the turn of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. He had grown up in a wealthy Italian family and was given the nickname “Francesco.” As a teenager while working for his family as a market salesman, a beggar approached him asking for money. Francesco gave the man everything he had in his pockets. He was later chastised and ridiculed by his family and friends for this as being foolish, but it was a significant event in his psychological and spiritual maturation.

At the age of around 20, the passionate and adventurous Francesco joined a military group but was injured, captured, and kept prisoner. He had plenty of time to think about life while healing physically before he was released, and so Francesco had a spiritual and psychological conversion experience. For a time, he joined the poor in begging outside of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, asking God for direction.

He went to the countryside and lived in a little hut, praying at a broken-down chapel nearby. In 1205 as a young adult Francesco had a mystical vision of Jesus who said to him: “*Francesco, Francesco, go and repair my house which, as you can see, is falling into ruins.*” Francesco at first followed the literal meaning and thought this meant that he should renovate the dilapidated building. For the next two years he repaired that chapel and other churches in the area.

By the time he was 30 years old, Francesco had completely given himself to a life of poverty, ministering to others and starting a religious order that would be known later as the “Franciscans.” One of his early followers was an 18-year-old girl named Clare, who was also from a wealthy family in Assisi. She too gave up her family’s wealth and started a similar religious order for women today known as the “Poor Clares.” St. Francis of Assisi was my Confirmation saint, and I believe he was an influence in my forming the nonprofit counseling organization called Gratia Plena. His spirit has some influence in the simple way I try to live my life today.

This ninth and final topic today has to do with living life full of grace, in Latin: “Gratia Plena.” In 2010 or 11 when I was contemplating the name “Gratia Plena” for the new organization, I asked a long-time priest friend what he thought about it. I asked him: “*What does this mean to live a life full of grace?*” He simply said that it refers to following God’s commandments and learning to avoid sin, loving God, loving our own selves, and loving others deeply. It means joining our will with God’s will. It was easy for him to say but can be a struggle for us to carry out. It is challenging, but certainly not impossible. Our model for this type of life is the Mother of Christ, the Virgin Mary, who was chosen to bear our Redeemer as she was and lived life “*full of grace*” (Luke 1:28), a title given to her by the Archangel Gabriel.

In chapter two of the Gospel of John, we have the scene of a wedding celebration at Cana in Galilee. The account in the scriptures reveal to us a few important aspects of living a life full of grace. Mary and Jesus are there at this festive event, and she becomes aware of a big problem for the married couple and their families: the wine for the reception has run out. (1) People living life full of grace notice the problems around them. They do not have their heads in the sand, and they do not ignore the problems. (2) Mary tells Jesus about the problem. People living a life full of grace are well-connected to the One who has the power to solve problems. They share their concerns with God, as Mary does at the wedding. (3) Mary tells people near Jesus to “*do whatever he tells you* (John 2:5).” People living a life full of grace take real action in service of others, to meet the real and practical needs that they have, based on discernment and guidance from the Holy Spirit. Following Jesus is not a spectator sport. It is not entertainment for our enjoyment.

Bishop N.T. Wright explains: “*We humans are called to stand at the intersection of heaven and earth, holding together in our hearts, our praises, and our urgent intercessions the loving wisdom of the creator God and the terrible torments of his battered world.*” p.80

In Luke chapter 5, a man with leprosy asked Jesus to be healed of his affliction. Jesus healed him but instructed him to go to the priest and make an offering of thanksgiving. The visit to the priest would have been important because the priest would have verified that the person was healed physically and spiritually, and thus could re-enter community life (the person with leprosy was considered excluded as contagious and sinful). The person who was healed would have been thankful that the confinement or seclusion was lifted. A person in this happiness might have been motivated to help others out of compassion, to encourage them, to give testimony to the glory of God.

[SLIDE 58]

In the 1930s, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin founded the Catholic Worker Movement in New York to care for the poor and advocate on their behalf. They believed in and shared with others the radical practice of Jesus' message in Matthew chapter 25 (31-46). In explaining to his disciples and others about how we will be judged, Jesus was recalling and emphasizing the words of the great prophet Isaiah (chapter 58) who relayed a message from God to "*Share your bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless; clothe the naked when you see them, and do not turn your back on your own.*" We hear about such actions of mercy in various places both in the Old and New Testaments.

Dorothy and Peter also believed in the spirit of St. Thérèse of Lisieux called "*the little way*" to live simply and to live close to those whom we serve, focused on small acts of kindness and love in the course of everyday life. These practices remain central to the Catholic Worker Movement today in organizations like Casa Juan Diego in Houston, started in the 1980s by Mark and Louise Zwick, or Maggie's Place in Phoenix started 20 years ago by Mary Peterson and a group of women alumni from the University of Notre Dame.

*"Dorothy found illustrated in Thérèse's life and words of Matthew 25, a central scripture passage for the Catholic Worker movement. The heart of Thérèse's message through her Little Way is love, the love of God, which could be so well expressed in the Works of Mercy. Thérèse understood from Matthew 25 that one could not love God without loving other people."* p. 292 Mark and Louise Zwick

[SLIDE 59]

In the Mass yesterday, Friday after Ash Wednesday, the prophet Isaiah (58) describes that these things are better than fasting:

The physical works of mercy are:

- Feed the hungry
- Give water to the thirsty
- Provide clothes for the poor
- Find shelter for the homeless
- Visit the sick
- Visit those in jail or prison
- Bury the dead

Isaiah says if we do these things, "...*then your wound will be healed.*" (verse 8)

The spiritual works of mercy are:

- Teach those who need education
- Counsel the doubtful
- Warn and advise sinners
- Be patient with those treat us incorrectly
- Forgive wrongs done to us
- Comfort the afflicted
- Pray for the living and the dead

Showing love and mercy are two of the most human acts possible, but these actions are a continuation of the mission of Jesus and so they are an encounter with Jesus in the human person we are assisting and loving and the Jesus in us. We don't have to wait and postpone our actions until we reach some sort of deep transformation. We can start where we are. But what we'll find is that after we engage in our own process of healing and restoration, in our resurrection we'll feel a deeper connection with the love that Jesus modeled for us and expresses to us. We become wounded healers.

We may have a sense that we are called to do something of God's work. St. Frances Xavier (Mother) Cabrini thought that her mission was to spread Christianity in China. Instead, Rome sent her to the United States. She was disappointed, but obedient. She was afraid to travel by ship across the ocean, but in her ministry, she made the trip many times. She founded many schools and hospitals in North America, Central America, and South America. Her religious order had a strong supportive impact on Italian and Sicilian immigrants in America who were greatly mistreated in those days. We are called to be open to wherever God may want us to work in His vineyard, and we should not be surprised at the great and unexpected adventures we'll have. We must be open and obedient to His will. It is what Jesus taught us in his prayer: "*May your Kingdom come, and Your will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven.*"

Saints Francis and Clare of Assisi, Thérèse, Mother Cabrini, Mother Teresa, and Dorothy Day all lived in this spirit, full of grace...and we can too. These saints are people just like us, who started with their flaws, but then were noticing, searching, reconciling, and surrendering, examining, healing, integrating, loving, and living life in the Spirit.

These are not just ideas for our contemplation. These are expectations, a responsibility for us to put into action on a regular basis, a way of life. Working through these take time, but if we attend to them, we will see great benefits. So, in this ninth topic, we see that elements of the eight previous activities are practiced in an ongoing manner: awareness and self-examination, acceptance, forgiveness, abandonment, and emptying. This freedom pushes us past the internal distractions of our addictions, attachments, and afflictions to be able to focus externally on loving others which is the real point of being Christian, *“to take up our cross and follow (Him).”* (Luke 9:22-25)

Also in the Thursday Mass readings this week, Moses (Deuteronomy 30:15-30) says that we have a choice for life or death, and he says *“choose life.”*

How or where the demonic may interfere:

The temptations of the demonic here are disobedience, selfishness, and laziness. The central temptation is to contemplate but never take any action. A related temptation is to believe that we are not perfect or talented enough to be of service to God and others. Remember that Jesus chose sinners and uneducated fishermen as his initial followers. He taught them to take be active in the community anyway and not to listen to the accuser who tells us we can't do any good. The demonic may continue to offer temptations and attacks, but the person is well-protected living a life of prayer and sacramental grace in service to others.

How or where the Holy Spirit may intervene:

The Holy Spirit is delivering gifts to enable the person to act as the hands and feet of Christ, in the way that humans were originally designed and destined to do. We experience joy in living out our full potential in the resurrection.

[SLIDE 60]

Questions for Reflection at the end of Session Four:

1. What areas of my life cry out for integration?
2. What are my barriers to loving others?
3. How might I better live out my human vocation for glorifying God by my loving work of service in His vineyard?

Our God is Emmanuel: with us. Jesus is the demonstration of this truth, and our encounter with Him in Adoration creates a deeper hunger and thirst for us to be intimately joined with Him in the Eucharist, so that we might love and have life to the full.

In Adoration, we can make ourselves fully present to Him who is fully present to us. We push away any and all distractions, as much as possible.

During Adoration, there will also be an opportunity for the Sacrament of Confession. At the end of Adoration, Father will give us a formal blessing, a Benediction, with the Blessed Sacrament. Then if you wish, you may stay to celebrate the Eucharist with the larger parish community.

[SLIDE 61] (remaining activities)

[SLIDE 62] (summary)

[SLIDE 63] (list of references or sources)

[SLIDE 64] (Gratia Plena program evaluation via your cell phone)

[SLIDE 65] (“The Serenity Prayer” closing prayer)

Thank you for inviting me to be present this day with you.