40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

Lent is an opportunity to bring oneself closer to God. The first stage of a Christian’s spiritual journey is to begin a process of “Purgation,” which simply means you begin a process of getting rid of your sinful tendencies and habits, and instead replacing these with the practice of Christian virtues. You also begin a process of detaching yourself from temporal things and attaching yourself more firmly to God. Lent is a time, as we prepare for Easter morning, to take the opportunity to pray, fast, and to reflect on our current spiritual state. It is a time to begin a process to change things up spiritually, to come out of our comfort zones, so that we can bring ourselves into greater union with God in preparation to receive the Resurrected Jesus more fully on Easter morning.

What is the 40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge?
Simply put, it is an opportunity to help you use meditative prayer and prayer time spent in silence, along with fasting and abstinence, to assist you in preparing yourself spiritually to receive the Risen Christ with joy and peace on Easter Morning. Our 40 Day challenge will run from March 6th, Ash Wednesday, until April 20th, Holy Saturday. Easter falls on April 21st this year. Following the Church’s Lenten tradition, Sundays are not counted as fasting days.

Participants who use the 40 Day Contemplative Challenge to help them to prepare for Easter will be encouraged to combine silent prayer, fasting or abstinence to prepare for Easter. Fridays, during Lent are traditional fast days, and if you are able to fast, these are days when you may choose to limit what you eat and drink to bread and water. You do not have to fast only eating bread and drinking water, particularly if there are health reasons for you not to. Fasting can also occur when one chooses to simply eat vegetables for one’s three meals, or limit what one eats to only peanut butter and bread. Fasting from food and drink in both variety and amount provides a means for you to exercise your will in a way that strengthens you, not only mentally, but spiritually. It does this by virtue of your exercising mental control of your physical needs. As you adhere to your choices concerning what you eat and drink and the amount you eat and drink, you strengthen yourself mentally and spiritually. As you avoid eating or drinking certain things, there is some small measure of suffering that you bear, but by sticking to what you have chosen to do, you strengthen your will power as you stay on your fast. To gain maximum mental and spiritual benefit from the fasting you do, you should offer your fasting up as a prayer.

Fasting using bread and water only, or eating only a small portion of peanut butter on bread are only suggestions. There are many ways to fast and abstain from food and drink and the other worldly pleasures that are beneficial ways of strengthening your will power. You just have to choose something that will work for you. Fasting also helps to raise one’s ability to resist temptations by virtue of the strength of character one gains by making efforts to forego eating
and drinking. Abstinence works similarly in that by forgoing certain favorite foods and drinks, or limiting the amount of food you eat and liquids you drink, you help yourself build up your strength to resist temptations and to control your bodily urges.

Fasting from Use of Electronic Media
All participants to the 40 Day Contemplative Challenge are encouraged to fast from watching TV. Also, participants are encouraged to fast from using your computers, iPad, and phones, particularly to play games, watch videos, or use unnecessary apps. Use of social media is also something we encourage you give up or limit. Avoidance of these forms of electronic media will not be easy, but it is encouraged because for the most part these are attention grabbers and time sinks that pull folks away from being present in the current moment. Electronic media focuses one’s attention on the demands placed on you, not only by the apps that send you notifications to encourage you to use them, but also by people who are not who you have currently in front of you. Watching TV, for instance, focuses your attention away from the other people in the room. Limiting the time you use electronic media will help you embrace silence and encourage prayer. The 40 Day Contemplative Challenge has as one of its prayer goals to encourage the participants to have an encounter with the Living God, and while no one knows when or if this will come, we hope you will use your silent time away from electronic media as a means of encouraging a big return in your feeling closer to God.

Meditative, Silent, and Contemplative Prayer
As far as prayer: Our 40 Contemplative Challenge is centered mostly in prayer, and we encourage folks to pray the Rosary on a daily basis. But the purpose of our daily reflections is to encourage participants to embrace using meditative prayer, as well as spending some time each day in silent or contemplative prayer. What we mean by spending time in silent prayer is simply this – spending time sitting prayerfully in silence. Time in silent prayer is for most people a necessary prelude to contemplative prayer, which is gift from God. Prayerful time spent in the silence of your heart is one sure way to help you train your mind and your heart to encounter the Presence of God. God comes in the silence of your heart, but you are less likely to notice our silent God if you do not make a concerted regular effort silently wait for Him.

Meditative prayer is something that you do. You focus your mind on a Scriptural scene like being present at the foot of the cross, and in that sense, you train your mind to focus on what you want it to focus on. Meditative prayer also uses silence and it helps one’s mind and heart to embrace silence as a means of praying. It is a doorway that can help one move into silent mental or Contemplative prayer.

Sitting in prayer in the silence of your heart is very difficult, for our minds are made to think. Thinking thoughts is what our mind is made for, and a typical experience for anyone new to silent prayer is to not experience anything like silence. Instead the busyness of their own thoughts captivates them and they are carried off by the chores they know they have to complete or the insult that they experienced that morning. These thoughts bounce around pulling one’s attention away from prayer and resting in silence and realizing God’s Presence. Meditative
prayer helps us learn to shift the focus in our mind away from the random thoughts that try to carry us off from our intended purpose in prayer, as we use our imagination to enliven our attention to the Presence of God around and in us. Training and controlling our imaginations are very important to any Christian intent on putting on the mind of Christ, for the imagination is the main battlefield of any spiritual journey. It is in our imaginations where temptations gain their power and it is in our imaginations where sin blooms in all its stained glory. For most of us meditative prayer is a necessary step in surrendering our deep-seeded focus on the world around us, and instead turn our attention inward to our center and towards God. Keeping a portion of our attention at our center helps us realize God’s Presence. Using meditative prayer helps us to train our imagination by focusing it in prayer on holy images and thoughts. This type of focus helps give us a very important measure of control over our imagination, which is a powerful playground for temptation. As one gains greater measures of control over one’s imagination, one begins to have a means of controlling their passions, and meditative prayer strengthens us in ways that not only make temptations less effective, but also helps us to embrace silence, so that we can better hear our God Who speaks to us in the silence of our hearts.

Over the 40 days of Lent, we hope and pray that you will use the reflections as an aid to your preparation for Easter. We also hope and pray that through the process of using the combination of vocal and meditative prayer, along with time spent in silent or contemplative prayer, that you will build a habit of prayer that incorporates in your prayer life time spent in the silence of your heart listening for God’s voice, and that in so doing, you will be brought closer to God.

God Bless
Cheryl Pilkington, Spiritual Director
David Morgan, parishioner
Deacon Joe Mills
Deacon Jim Caldwell
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 6th
Ash Wednesday

There are no neutral decisions in the spiritual life, for every decision one makes is either for God or against God.

After having made a choice to believe in Jesus Christ, we begin a grace-filled spiritual journey our early Christian brothers and sisters called “The Way.” It was called this because our spiritual journey, when embraced whole-heartedly, begins a life-long journey back to God. That journey involves three stages or phases commonly referred to as the Purgative stage; Illuminative stage; and the Unitive stage of the spiritual journey. The Purgative stage, once begun, is a process that takes on a life-long character and becomes a permanent aspect of one’s spiritual life. Purgation’s goal is to get rid of those things in one’s life that are not of God. The spiritual life is lived on a daily basis and bears either good fruit or bad fruit as each of us makes our daily decisions. We progress spiritually based on our openness to God’s grace, and it is through our prayer life that the transformative nature of God’s grace changes us or transfigures us so that we can put on the mind of Christ more fully by how we live our lives. Every one of us is in the midst of an interior battle with one’s sinfulness, our attachments to temporal comforts and things, and our need to control, be recognized for accomplishments, and to be successful in the temporal world. Lent is a time to make a bit of a heightened effort through fasting and prayer to strengthen us against our sinful tendencies and our attachments to comfort and things.

Lenten Action
Today, if you are a regular practitioner of contemplative prayer or spending time in praying in the silence of your heart, pray before you start that God will come to you in a special way during Lent and give you the grace to improve your prayer life.

If you are new to spending time in silent prayer, find a comfortable place where you can sit in silence. When you have gotten into a comfortable sitting position, say a brief prayer telling God you want to be with Him and asking Him to help you silence your thoughts. Then direct the focus of your attention on your breathing. Feel the rising and falling of your chest and what it feels like as you fill your lungs and expel your breath. Rest in the rhythm of your breathing. When random thoughts intrude, notice them and then let them go and return to focusing your attention on the rhythm of your breathing. At first you may only be able to spend 5 minutes in silent prayer like this. Don’t be upset if you don’t actually get to a place where your mind is silent. This is natural because your mind is made to think. And please do not measure your success at this form of prayer by how much silence you experience. Worldly measures here have no real value. Also do not attempt to drive your thoughts away. This will only disturb your ability to sit in silence. Simply notice them and let them go.

Today is a Fast day if you are physically able. Everyone should abstain from eating meat and limit the amount of food one eats. Remember not to watch TV, use computers or your phones to access computer games or unnecessary apps. Please avoid using social media.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 7th
Thursday after Ash Wednesday

Be still and know that I am God
Be still and know that I am
Be still and know
Be still
Be!

Are you a human being or a human doing? Modern life is full of things to do. We have family responsibilities, job responsibilities, things we have to do at home, kids to take to soccer practice and band practice, and not much time for silence. In fact, if one were to look over what happens on a typical day in one’s life, even in times when we could have silence, we choose noise. We listen to the radio in our cars, the TV provides background noise to dinner, and our cell phone is ever in our hand as we respond to every app notification that pings us to get our attention. For most people who are living today there is no time simply dedicated “to being!” In the heart of all your busyness, you act like a human doing, but you really are a human BE-ing! Jesus told us very clearly in the Gospel of John, “I am in you and you are in me!” To do that though, we must choose to be in Him, and that comes only if we put ourselves into a state of mind where we regularly wait for Him to reveal Himself to us. This is the beginning of what Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection calls the “Practice of the Presence of God.” We will hear more about Brother Lawrence later in our reflections. For now, over the course of your busy day bring your attention back to “Being” and a rest in Jesus by doing what you are doing out of love of God and remember that Jesus is with you, for He is in you as you are in Him.

Lenten Action
Today, if you are a regular practitioner of contemplative prayer spend time in contemplative silence imagining that you are in Jesus as He is in you. Ask God to come to you in a special way today and throughout Lent and give you the grace to improve your prayer life.

If you are new to spending time in silent prayer, find a comfortable place where you can sit in silence. When you have gotten into a comfortable sitting position, say a brief prayer telling God you want to be with Him and asking Him to help you silence your thoughts. Then direct the focus of your attention on your breathing. Feel the rising and falling of your chest and what it feels like as you fill your lungs and expel your breath. Rest in the rhythm of your breathing. When random thoughts intrude, notice them and then let them go and return to focusing your attention of the rhythm of your breathing. At first you may only be able to spend 5 minutes in silent prayer like this. Don’t be upset if you don’t actually get to a place where your mind is silent. This is natural because your mind is made to think. And please do not measure your success at this form of prayer by how much silence you experience. Worldly measures here have no real value. Also do not attempt to drive your thoughts away. This will only disturb your ability to sit in silence. Simply notice them and let them go. Today, as you embrace sitting in silent prayer, focus your meditation on feeling Jesus’ Presence standing beside you and then on His Presence in you.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 8th
Friday after Ash Wednesday

We see many times in the Gospels in Jesus’ life, that He finds Himself in crowds of people, all of whom want something from Him. During His public ministry, He walks with sinners, outcasts, and the sick both spiritually and in body. In all of this we see Him respond to their needs with great love and compassion. But when His day of working with the people is done, we also see Him withdraw to spend time in silent prayer. As one example, before He began His public ministry just after His baptism in the river Jordan by John the Baptist, we see Jesus go out into the desert to fast and to pray for 40 days. The Church in its wisdom encourages us to go out into the desert to pray and fast during Lent in preparation for Easter morning as a way of imitating Jesus’ 40-day time in the desert. Jesus did what He did to help strengthen and prepare Himself to embrace more fully His Father in Heaven’s Holy Will. Lent provides us with a similar graced preparation time for continuing our journey back to God, which is the main mission of any Christian life, living in holy ways as our Father in Heaven is Holy. Our lives as Christians has the focus of Loving God with every fiber of our being, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. We show our love of God by how we love our neighbors. And we love our neighbors best when we do the things that are necessary to help them on the way to heaven. Today, direct your attention to others in a way that takes notice of what they might need in the way of their sanctification. Act in a way that shows you love God by loving them.

Lenten Action

Whether you make regular use of contemplative or silent prayer or not, today spend some time meditating on Jesus’ time in the desert after His baptism as the source of your meditation. (Lk 4:1-13)

If you are a regular practitioner of contemplative prayer use Jesus’ response to Satan’s temptations as a touchstone for some of your silent prayer. Ask God to come to you in a special way today and throughout Lent to strengthen you against temptations.

If you are new to spending time in silent prayer, find a comfortable place where you can sit in silence. Once you have gotten comfortable, tell God you want to be with Him and ask Him to help you silence your thoughts. Direct your attention on your breathing. Feel the rising and falling of your chest and what it feels like as you fill your lungs and expel your breath. Rest in the rhythm of your breathing. When random thoughts intrude, notice them and then let them go and return to focusing your attention on the rhythm of your breathing. At first you may only be able to spend 5 minutes in silent prayer like this. Don’t be upset if you don’t actually get to a place where your mind is silent. This is natural because your mind is made to think. And please do not measure your success at this form of prayer by how much silence you experience. Worldly measures here have no real value. Also do not attempt to drive your thoughts away. This will only disturb your ability to sit in silence. Simply notice them and let them go. Today, as you embrace sitting in silent prayer, focus your meditation on what Jesus did in response to Satan’s temptations and the things that Satan tried to us to tempt Jesus away from His public mission.

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40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 9th
Saturday After Ash Wednesday

“Everyone who is tempted is attracted and seduced by his [or her] own wrong desire. Then the desire conceives and gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown it too has a child, and the child is death.”
James 1:14-15

The problem with sin is that it feels good and it fulfills one or more desires we believe we need to feel comfortable, be happy, or give us the power, fame, or fortune we believe we deserve in life. As we begin Lent, it would be a good thing to take an inventory of our life and look at the things that we believe we need to be happy and then identify whether we think having them is really bringing us closer to God or taking us away from God. We can begin to combat our sin only when we place ourselves more fully in the Mind of Christ by knowing our sinful tendencies and coming to know what our near occasions of sin are. We have to choose to avoid sin by running from it. But we also have to realize that our resistance of the temptations we face in daily life happen only through God’s grace. Now we don’t want to dwell on the negative, nor do we want to keep our thoughts in a dualistic mode, such as focusing for instance on good and evil as opposites. What we do want to do is to open our hearts to the grace of God so that the Divine Presence that is at the very core of our being will reveal to us our wrong desires and then move us away from them so that we may avoid the death that comes to us through our sinfulness. Spend some time in silent prayer asking God to reveal something in your life that is a wrong desire giving birth to sin in your life. Work today to develop ideas for how you can avoid such sinful tendencies and more fully experience God’s freedom from whatever sinful wrong desire God encouraged you to work on.

Lenten Action
If you are a regular practitioner of Contemplative prayer spend your normal time in such prayer.

If you are new to spending time in silent prayer, find a comfortable place where you can sit in silence and get yourself into a comfortable sitting position. Say a brief prayer telling God you want to be with Him and asking Him to help you silence your thoughts. Then direct the focus of your attention on your breathing. Feel the rising and falling of your chest. Feel your lungs as you breath in and out. Rest in the rhythm of your breathing. When random thoughts intrude, notice them and then let them go and refocus your attention of the rhythm of your breathing. Try to extend your time in silent prayer if you were only doing 5 minutes. Don’t be upset if you don’t actually get to a place where your mind is silent. This is natural because your mind is made to think. Don’t judge your success in silent prayer by whether you were able to banish your thoughts and have a silent mind. Worldly measures here have no real value. Do not attempt to drive your thoughts away. This will only disturb your ability to sit in silence. Simply notice them and let them go.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 10th
First Sunday of Lent

In Paul’s Letter to the Romans from today’s scripture readings, Paul says, “What does Scripture say? The word is near you in your mouth and in your heart – that is the word of faith that we preach – for, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:8-13)

The Good News of the Gospel changes one’s life through grace. When we truly believe and begin to live according to Jesus’ teachings God’s G.R.A.C.E., God’s Radical Action Changes Everything! Faith is a gift, but it is also a choice and we need to pray that God solidifies our choices for Him in our hearts and renews our faith in us each day. To be strong in our faith, we have to pay attention to Jesus. Jesus speaking to two very poor sisters in England told them that He was beside them always, but that they could not feel His Presence with them unless they shut out the distractions of the world. Jesus is the breath of our very soul, but to hear that breath, we have to shut ourselves in that secret place deep within our being, which is Jesus’ secret place too. Today, spend some time in that deep and quiet secret place deep within your heart to hear Jesus. Talk to Jesus from your heart and reflect on Him. Do not say what you think about Him. Rather rest in Him in the silence of your heart and listen. Over the course of your day, spend some time meditating on the story of two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Imagine Jesus opening the scriptures for you and feel the amazement of the two disciples when they recognized Jesus. (Road to Emmaus: Lk 24:13-35)

Lenten Action
If you are a regular practitioner of Contemplative prayer spend your normal time in such prayer.

If you are new to spending time in silent prayer, find a comfortable place where you can sit in silence and get yourself into a comfortable sitting position. Say a brief prayer telling God you want to be with Him and asking Him to help you silence your thoughts. Then direct the focus of your attention on your breathing. Feel the rising and falling of your chest. Feel the rhythm of your breathing as your lungs expand and contract. Rest in the rhythm of your breathing. When random thoughts intrude, notice them and then let them go and refocus your attention of the rhythm of your breathing. Try to extend your time in silent prayer if you were only doing 5 minutes. Don’t be upset if you don’t actually get to a place where your mind is silent. This is natural because your mind is made to think. Don’t judge your success in silent prayer by whether you were able to banish your thoughts and have a silent mind. Worldly measures here have no real value. Do not attempt to drive your thoughts away. This will only disturb your ability to sit in silence. Simply notice them and let them go.

Today is not a Fast day or a day to abstain from anything including TV, computer games, social media or other forms of electronic media on your phones and iPad. Have fun playing in the electronic world if you like, but try to find where God is in all this for you.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 11th
Monday, First Week of Lent

In today’s Old Testament Mass reading from the Book of Leviticus (19:1-2), we hear the Lord tell Moses, “Be Holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.” In part, that holiness is determined by what is addressed in today’s Gospel reading from Matthew 25:31-46, where Jesus tells His disciples about how the sheep will be separated from the goats at the final judgment. There the measuring stick to be used to determine who will inherit the Kingdom will be whether one feeds the hungry, gives drink to the thirsty, welcomes the stranger, clothes the naked, cares for the sick, visits prisoners, and cares for orphans and widows. These, of course, are the charitable and loving actions by which we Christians show our love of God by how we love our neighbors. God’s love for us is gratuitous, and we can’t return our love of God in any gratuitous way directly. By this is meant that we can never give love back to God directly without it being shaded in some way by temporal needs. We need and want things in this life and we know God is the Ultimate Provider. We can, however, give a gratuitous flavor to our love for God by the gratuitous love we show our neighbors. Our hearts and minds, however, often are not where they should be in relation to the love we show our neighbors. Like the Grinch that Stole Christmas, our hearts are two sizes too small, and only God can transform our stoney hearts into human loving hearts. The way of the soul’s transformation is the Way of Divine Companionship. The transformation of our hearts happens not so much by asking Jesus to make us this or that, but by living with Jesus, thinking of Him, talking to Him, and surrendering one’s heart to Him so that we may grow into Him. This is what it means to practice the Presence of God and it is how one puts on the Mind of Christ more fully. Love is a virtue that must be practiced in order to become the default way of acting in our all too unloving world. We must choose to practice love faithfully for our neighbors, even the ones we do not like, in order for us to love as God loves. Today, do some loving act of kindness for someone in need without the expectation of some form of return.

Lenten Action
If you are a regular practitioner of Contemplative prayer spend your normal time in such prayer.

If you are new to spending time in silent prayer, find a comfortable place where you can sit in silence and get yourself into a comfortable sitting position. Say a brief prayer telling God you want to be with Him and asking Him to help you silence your thoughts. Then direct the focus of your attention on your breathing. Feel the rising and falling of your chest. Feel your lungs as you breathe in and out. Rest in the rhythm of your breathing. When random thoughts intrude, notice them and then let them go and refocus your attention of the rhythm of your breathing. Try to extend your time in silent prayer if you were only doing 5 minutes. Don’t be upset if you don’t actually get to a place where your mind is silent. This is natural because your mind is made to think. Don’t judge your success in silent prayer by whether you were able to banish your thoughts and have a silent mind. Worldly measures here have no real value. Do not attempt to drive your thoughts away. This will only disturb your ability to sit in silence. Simply notice them and let them go.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 12th
Tuesday, First Week of Lent – Into to the Practice of the Presence of God

Today we shall explore some of Lawrence of the Resurrection’s *Practice of the Presence of God*. Lawrence was a member of a Carmelite Monastery in Paris, France in the 16th century. He did many jobs in his time at the monastery, but the one that he did the longest was to cook meals for 160 monks a day, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Now as you might imagine, cooking meals for that number of people is an all-consuming and demanding task taking most of the day. He was not alone in his very noisy kitchen. So, you would be right if you thought that being in such a busy and noisy environment every day would present a huge challenge to living a contemplative prayer life. Lawrence prayed meditatively when he could, but he wanted to be with God in every moment. In Lawrence’s own words” “From the moment I entered religious life, I considered God to be the goal and end of all my soul’s thoughts and affections.” Lawrence developed what he called the Practice of the Presence of God by faking it until he made it. By that is meant, he decided to do every duty for God and he also focused his attention on recognizing God’s Presence with him in every moment and in everything that he did. Using “the light of faith,” he felt that he would come to know God better by finding God’s Presence in doing the things he was required to do by, in, and through God, and by focusing his attention to God by making frequent little prayerful acts of faith and love for God. Brother Lawrence devoted what time he could to mental prayer, but he worked hard to develop a habit making every task he did in the kitchen a prayer. He prayed before his work, ‘My God since you are with me, and since I must apply myself to these duties by your order, I beg you to give me the grace to remain with you and keep you company. Even better, my Lord, work with me, accept my efforts and take possession of all my affections.’ Frequently, Brother Lawrence would do his work and speak intimately with God, offering up his little services, asking God for His graces. At the end of the day, he would review what he had done looking for any faults, and then beg for forgiveness. The Practice of the Presence of God rests in a contemplative understanding that every task and every action is an opportunity to abide with God, if one will only frequently direct one’s thoughts towards God. Doing frequent little acts of faith and love for God as you work, builds a habitual realization of God’s Presence in all things. Eventually, Brother Lawrence noted that by making the sensing God’s Divine Presence in the ordinary events and tasks of life a habit, “…I arrived at a state in which it would have been just as impossible not to think about God as it was difficult to get used to doing so in the beginning.

**Lenten Action**

If you are a regular practitioner of Contemplative prayer spend your normal time in such prayer. Contemplate some about how you might turn your actions into a habit of Practicing the Presence of God.

If you are new to spending time in silent prayer, sit comfortably in a quiet place, and ask God to be with you and help you silence your thoughts. Concentrate on your breath going in and out and feel the rising and falling of your chest. Feel the rhythm of your breathing, and as you do bring your contemplation to feeling God’s Presence. Sit for 10 minutes silently. Remain at peace and let go of any intruding wayward thoughts bringing yourself back to the quiet Presence of God in you.

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40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 13th
Wednesday, First Week of Lent

“Everything is possible for one who believes, still more for one who hopes, even more for one who loves, and most of all for one who practices and perseveres in these three virtues. All baptized who are true believers have taken the first step along the way of perfection and will become perfect as long as they persevere in the practice of [the Presence of God.]” Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection (Spiritual Maxum 1)

The human condition is broken, which is born out in our natural concupiscence (our attraction to sin). The French call concupiscence nostalgie de bouie or the attraction to the mud. Sin feels good. It attracts us because it fulfills some desire that starts small and soon blows way out of proportion when we indulge in it too much. Baptism starts us on the life long journey back to God. If you were baptized as an infant, then it is likely you do not remember your baptism. Hopefully, you may remember when it was that you made an adult choice to follow Jesus teachings and thereby live the Christian life more fully. Once the decision is made to follow Christ, a process begins that runs through all the choices you made that have brought you to where you are now in your life. Were those choices for God or against God? Brother Lawrence’s Practice of the Presence of God rests in the understanding that all things are possible from a spiritual perspective by directing one’s attention towards God in faith, hope, and love. In faith one believes that God’s grace abides in and all around us and that God is with us. This engenders a great hope in the transformative nature of grace that blossoms forth and transfigures everything in God’s love. As Jesus says to two old and penurious English sisters to whom He appeared, “The way of the soul’s transformation is the Way of Divine Companionship. Not so much the asking Me to make you this or that but the living with Me, thinking of Me, talking to Me – thus you grow like Me. Love Me, Rest in Me, Joy in Me.” God Calling. Today, practice the Presence of God by imagining God walking beside you in each moment.

Lenten Action
If you are a regular practitioner of Contemplative prayer spend your normal time in such prayer.

If you are new to spending time in silent prayer, get comfortable and in the silence of your heart tell God you want to be with Him and ask Him to help you silence your thoughts. Then direct the focus of your attention on your breathing. Feel the rising and falling of your chest. Feel your lungs as you breathe in and out. Rest in the rhythm of your breathing. When random thoughts intrude, notice them and then let them go and refocus your attention of the rhythm of your breathing. Try to extend your time in silent prayer if you were only doing 5 minutes. Don’t be upset if you don’t actually get to a place where your mind is silent. This is natural because your mind is made to think. Don’t judge your success in silent prayer by whether you were able to banish your thoughts and have a silent mind. Worldly measures here have no real value. Do not attempt to drive your thoughts away. This will only disturb your ability to sit in silence. Simply notice them and let them go.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.
“We must keep our eyes fixed on God in everything we say, do or undertake. Our goal is to be the most perfect adorers of God in this life as we hope to be throughout all eternity. We must make a firm resolution to overcome with God’s grace, all the difficulties inherent in the spiritual life.”
Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. (Spiritual Maximum 2)

Do you think of your life as one of perfect adoration of God? Are your eyes always fixed on God in everything you say, do, or undertake? In today’s Gospel reading from the Gospel of Matthew, we hear Jesus tell us “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and the one who knocks, the door is opened to you.” There are two pillars of the spiritual life: Excellence of Praise and the Adornment of the Soul with Virtues. Neither is possible for us without the transformative nature of the grace of God. Jesus says to the two old and penurious visionary sisters in England, “Hear and I answer. Spend much time in prayer. Prayer is of many kinds, but of whatever kind, prayer is the linking up of the soul and mind and heart to God. … Because the soul, being linked to God, united to Him, receives in and through Him all things…” God Calling. The spiritual life is not easy. God knows this, which is why He so much waits for us to ask for Divine help through the gift of grace. Ask and ye shall receive! Our biggest challenge to our holiness is our very own self. Our bodily needs and desires loom before us like large reptilian creatures that can easily drag us off into the darkness of sin. St. Dominic once said, "A man who governs his passions is master of his world. We must either command them or be enslaved by them. It is better to be a hammer than an anvil." All things are possible to those who rest in God and become the masters of their passions. That can only happen if one takes the time and makes the effort to train one’s imagination through meditative prayer and silent mental or contemplative prayer. For the subjugation of one’s thoughts and the imaginative passions that play out in the mind feed our passions and our greatest temptations. Today, look at how your imagination has in some way led you to sin or made your temptations more powerful. Then take a look at how Brother Lawrence’s practice of the Presence of God might help to fight your attraction to sin and your temptations.

**Lenten Action**
If you are a regular practitioner of Contemplative prayer spend your normal time in such prayer. Contemplate some about how you might turn your actions into a habit of Practicing the Presence of God.

If you are new to spending time in silent prayer, sit comfortably in a quiet place, and ask God to be with you and help you silence your thoughts. Concentrate on your breath going in and out and feel the rising and falling of your chest. Feel the rhythm of your breathing, and as you do bring your contemplation to feeling God’s Presence. Sit for 10 minutes silently. Remain at peace and let go of any intruding wayward thoughts bringing yourself back to the quiet Presence of God in you.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 15th
Friday – First Week of Lent

The virtue of Humility – “When we undertake the spiritual life, we must seriously consider who we are, recognizing that we are worthy of all scorn, unworthy of the name Christian, and subject to all kinds of miseries and a multitude of setbacks. These disturb us and make our health, our moods, our inner dispositions and their outward manifestations changeable; in all, we are persons God wants to humble by means of a multitude of internal and external troubles and trials.” Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection (Spiritual Maxum 3)

The core truth of the spiritual journey is to go deep within oneself to find God and to know God. While doctrines and dogma are important because they give boundaries, they are intellectual constructs. You can only come to know God and love God by going deep within. As Alex Smith says in his work Healing the Divide: Recovering Christianity’s Mystic Roots, “My core truth about Jesus isn’t rooted in mainstream Christian tradition. It’s rooted in Jesus’ essence. It’s about the deep stillness of silent prayer and a theology big enough to give that blessed stillness words.” Unlike St. Paul, most of us have not had Jesus come to us in a vision, and so it is in the silence of our hearts that we come to know God. “Be still and know that I am God.” But in that same stillness, one also comes to know one’s self, and as one dives deep within oneself, the wounds inflicted on us by our lived life, our faults, our sins, and our attachments loom forth and we come face to face with them. It is in that confrontation that we began to seriously consider who we are recognizing, as Brother Lawrence notes, that we are worthy to scorn and unworthy to be named a disciple of Christ. We are not God, and so we must humbly take the command of God to be still to heart, for it is only in that stillness that we will come to know Him or for that matter come to know ourselves. It takes a humble heart to embrace silence. And it takes a regular practice of stillness in silence to bring the calmness of spirit necessary for the true work of God to begin in us and through us. It is that same calmness that allows the mind, body, and soul to be strong and peaceful when facing the things that that life throws at us to disturb our peace. That peace will help us bear things such as health issues, changes in moods and inner disposition, that threaten to rob our peace. Peace is the work of righteous living in Jesus free of the whims of our passions. Quietness of heart and blessed assurance follow. So, what robs you of your peace? Spend some time contemplating on that.

Lenten Action
Whether you make regular use of contemplative or silent prayer or not, today spend some time meditating on Jesus. The beginning of humility is found in knowing yourself & in that knowing come to know God.

Regular practitioners of contemplative prayer should spend a couple of times today in 20-minute periods in contemplative prayer. Ask God for the gift of the virtue of humility. If you are new to spending time in silent prayer, get comfortable and in the silence of your heart ask God to come to you and silence your thoughts. Focus on your breathing & feel the rising and falling of your chest, as you fill your lungs and expel your breath. Rest in the rhythm of your breathing.

Today should be a Fast day if you are physically able. Everyone should abstain from eating meat and limit the amount of food one eats. Remember not to watch TV, use computers or your phones to access computer games or unnecessary apps. Please avoid using social media.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 16th
Saturday, First Week of Lent

“You have heard it said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be children of your heavenly Father… So be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Mt 5:43-48)

At the heart of this statement by Jesus from today’s Gospel reading is the idea that God is and always will be so much bigger than our ideas about Him. God the Father and Jesus’ Love is very different than our love. And so our question today is can we love as God loves? Can we love what God loves? For clearly according to Jesus God even loves His enemies. So can we love what He clearly loves and allows in creation even unto those we dislike and who are our enemies? Brother Lawrence notes in his 4th Spiritual Maxim that, “We must believe that it is advantageous for us and pleasing to God to sacrifice ourselves to Him, that it is normal for His Divine Providence to abandon us to all sorts of trials, miseries and temptations for the love of God, and for as long as He likes.” Brother Lawrence goes on to note that “Without this submission of heart and mind to the will of God, devotion and perfection cannot endure.” Loving one’s enemies is hard, yet God loves them as He loves you. He does not like the unloving things they do to you or the suffering they may cause you, yet He still loves them. God’s love is expansive enough that He honors the free will choices both you and your enemy make in life that offend Him. He permits both you and your enemies to do what you choose to do even when it is against Him. Why He does this is a mystery, but in all of it He permits it out of love, with the goal of your eventual sanctification. In fact, the command to love your enemies is a command to love as God loves – A command to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. Today, do something nice for someone you dislike or who is your enemy.

**Lenten Action**

If you are a regular practitioner of Contemplative prayer spend your normal time in such prayer. Contemplate some on your enemies and how you might love them as God loves them, and how in your actions towards them you might Practice the Presence of God.

If you are new to spending time in silent prayer, sit comfortably in a quiet place, and ask God to be with you and help you silence your thoughts. Concentrate on your breath going in and out and feel the rising and falling of your chest. Feel the rhythm of your breathing, and as you do bring your contemplation to feeling God’s Presence. Sit for 10 minutes silently. Remain at peace and let go of any intruding wayward thoughts bringing yourself back to the quiet Presence of God in you. Silent prayer is different than meditation because in silent prayer you remain in a state of waiting for God to do something. In meditation you do something when you focus your attention on what you are meditating about. Both are transformative ways of prayer, but one is you doing something and the other is God doing something. So with this in mind, when you are done, sit a while and meditate on your enemies and how you might love them as God loves them.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 17th
Second Sunday of Lent – Noticing the Sacred in Daily Life

“In my best, most alive moments - in my mystical moments, if you want – I have a profound sense of belonging. At those moments, I am aware of being truly at home in the universe… But the fact is that while the rest of the universe moves freely and gracefully in cosmic harmony, we humans don’t. It costs us an effort to attune ourselves to the dynamic order of love.”

Brother David Steindl-Rast, from The Way of Silence

Brother David is talking about God’s love and surrendering to divine providence. The further we venture on this spiritual journey the more we appreciate an underlying order, a divine harmony, of God’s hand in everything. We tend to see ourselves as separate from God, separate from each other, and separate from the world. Since we were cast from the Garden of Eden, we habitually eat from the “tree of knowledge”, dividing the world into this and that, right and wrong, good and evil. We think we understand and control things like Newton’s laws, Einstein’s relativity and grass grows because photosynthesis uses the sun’s energy to synthesize food from carbon dioxide and water. But do we really understand even a single blade of grass? If we look deeply, we see the amazing miracles all around us and have to admit we have really only documented aspects of how God’s awesome universe works, in all its harmony.

Surrendering ourselves to God’s will, His divine harmony, and reaping the ensuing grace that follows this ultimate act of faith, is part of what Brother Lawrence gets at in his 5th maxim: “A soul depends on grace in proportion to its desire for greater perfection…”. When we separate ourselves from God and His universe, and try to bring about our will, independent form God’s, we suffer. However, when we fall into the harmonious flow and work with God and not independent of Him, His ensuing grace aides our efforts.

As we try to bring about what we believe to be God’s will, we have to open ourselves to His feedback. We must remove our ego from our actions and ensure we are really doing them for God and not ourselves or the opinions of others. Then we will drop into the harmonious flow and stop fighting against it.

Lenten Action

Spend some time in nature. If you can find a sunny spot, sit in a comfortable position and let the sun warm your face. Close your eyes. Scan through your body and relax every muscle. Let go of any tension or stress you are holding. Listen carefully to every sound. Don’t analyze the sounds, just experience them. Watch with your mind’s eye for every new sound as it arises. Listen as attentively as a cat poised at a mouse hole waits for a mouse. Stay there as long as is comfortable.

If you are a regular practitioner of Contemplative prayer spend your normal time in such prayer. If you are new to silent prayer, sit comfortably in a quiet place, close your eyes and ask God to be with you. Notice your breath. Feel your stomach and chest rise and fall. Repeat silently to yourself, “speak Lord” on your in-breath and “I am listening” on your out-breath. Listen to the silence between the words and breaths. After a while, take a series of breaths without the prayer and continue to listen to God. When thoughts or any mental dialog arise, let them go and restart the prayer for a few more breaths. Then try again without the words. Continue like this for about ten minutes or however long feels comfortable.

Today is not a Fast day or a day to abstain from anything including TV, computer games, social media or other forms of electronic media on your phones and ipads. Have fun playing in the electronic world if you like, but try to find where God is in all this for you.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 18th
Second Monday of Lent - The Kingdom of God is Within You

Jesus taught a spiritual gospel. He taught we can achieve divine perfection and we can obtain this perfection through a practice of prayer, surrender to God, renunciation of worldliness, contemplation of God, and the purification of our hearts through the love of God. He announced the Good News of salvation and told us of God’s unconditional love for us. He taught us “the Kingdom of God” was at hand and to see it we must turn inward in prayer and deny ourselves. Let us continue investigating practical means of carrying out this guidance and realizing the promises of Christ.

Jesus tells us to go inside to find God, but when we try to think of only God we encounter dozens of distracting thoughts. Does Jesus tell us how to deal with these distractions? After his baptism by John the Baptist, Jesus went into the desert to pray and fast for 40 days. During that time He was tempted repeatedly by the devil. He countered His temptations with verses from Deuteronomy: “Man does not live by bread alone.”, “Thou shall not tempt the Lord thy God.”, and “The Lord thy God shalt thou worship and him only shalt thou serve.” Matthew 4:4-10; Deuteronomy 8:3; 6:16; 26:10.

So, should we memorize Deuteronomy and use scripture verses to combat every thought that tries to steer us away from God’s Presence? During the first few centuries after Jesus’ crucifixion the Desert Fathers began in just such a manner, striving to commune with God in their isolated hermitages surrounding the Holy Land. Over the years, monastics and long-time practitioners of silent prayer evolved these approaches. Nowadays, short prayer words or phrases are used repeatedly to focus one’s attention on God and steer it away from worldly thoughts.

This 40-day challenge is a chance for us to go into our internal deserts, fast and learn to pray in a manner that saints and sages have evolved over the centuries, and in doing so draw closer to the eternal Presence of God that is always in and around us.

**Lenten Action**

If you are a regular practitioner of contemplative prayer, read Section 1 of Practical Instructions for Practicing the Presence of God (attached). Consider incorporating some or all of those practices into your daily prayers. Then spend your normal time in contemplative prayer.

If you are new to meditation and contemplative prayer, read Section 1 of Practical Instructions for Practicing the Presence of God (attached). Find a quiet place where you can sit comfortably and Practice the Presence as outlined in the booklet.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.”
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 19th
Second Tuesday of Lent – Deeper Into to the Practice of the Presence of God

Fifteen letters Brother Lawrence had written to acquaintances over the last ten years of his life were found in his footlocker after his death in 1691. These letters, a set of maxims, and some biographical material make up all we know of this blessed man. Abbot De Beaufort published this material in a small book known as Practicing the Presence of God. In the second letter contained in that book, Brother Lawrence describes his practice and his resulting state of being after many years of undertaking it:

“… I make it my business only to persevere in His holy presence, wherein I keep myself by a simple attention, and a general fond regard to God, which I may call an actual Presence of God; or, to speak better, an habitual, silent, and secret conversation of the soul with God, which often causes in me joys and raptures inwardly, and sometimes also outwardly, so great that I am forced to use means to moderate them, and prevent their appearance to others.”

Brother Lawrence lived in the contemplative state, a state of continuous communion with God. From Brother Lawrence’s description, it sounds like a wonderful ecstatic state of being, a heaven on earth, a continuous communion with God. Brother Lawrence cautions us not to pursue this state of being for its pleasure, but to seek God’s presence from a principle of love and because it is God’s will for us. OK, so let us pursue this for the right reasons, but how do we go about it? How do we live in continuous communion with God? Ultimately, of course this is a gift provided by the Grace of God; however, Saint Teresa of Avila tells us, there is a lot we can do to put ourselves in a position to receive this Grace. The meditation and contemplative prayer instructions provided with this Lenten challenge, and dedicated perseverance on your part, should set you on a course to meet God halfway in receiving this Grace.

For the first 16 centuries, achieving this contemplative state was the goal of western Christianity. However, after the Protestant reformation and the 30-year war, the focus shifted. Contemplative prayer continued in some Roman Catholic monastic traditions such as the Carmelite tradition, and never faltered at all in other branches of Catholicism, such as the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Fortunately for us, since Vatican II’s refocusing, contemplative prayer has seen a revitalization in our Roman Catholic Church. Monastics, such as Thomas Merton, Fathers Thomas Keating, Basil Pennington, and William Menninger have championed a resurgence of Catholic meditation and contemplation.

Lenten Action

Obtain a copy of Brother Lawrence’s book, Practicing the Presence of God, and begin reading it.

If you are a regular practitioner of contemplative prayer, review Section 1 of Practical Instructions for Practicing the Presence of God (attached to this email). Consider incorporating these practices into your daily prayers. Then spend your normal time in contemplative prayer.

If you are new to meditation and contemplative prayer, re-read Section 1 of Practical Instructions for Practicing the Presence of God (attached to this email). Find a quiet place where you can sit comfortably and Practice the Presence as outlined in the booklet.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.”
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 20th
Third Wednesday of Lent – The Presence of God Can Be Experienced Continuously

In Acts 17:27-28, Saint Paul tells us that God “is not far from any one of us. For in Him we live and move and have our being… We are his offspring.”

While Saint Paul can at times be difficult to understand, his message here is pretty straightforward. We know in our hearts that God is eternal and everywhere. Therefore, it stands to reason that if God is infinite and everywhere, He must be in us as well. So why do we go about our daily business as if God is off somewhere separate from us? It is because we have established a habit of seeing God as separate from us. As we go about our daily tasks, let us begin establishing a new habit; let us remember often God is with us and remind ourselves often, it is not “me” doing this, but “We”. Brother Lawrence would agree. In the fourth conversation with Brother Lawrence he states,

“That we need only to recognize God intimately present with us, to address ourselves to Him every moment, that we may beg His assistance for knowing His will in things doubtful, and for rightly performing those which we plainly see He requires of us, offering them to Him before we do them, and giving Him thanks when we have done... That we ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed.”

We do not necessarily have to change what we do, only the intent with which we do it. Let us ask God that His will be done, and that He guide us in doing His will. If we do everything for the love of God, then picking up the kids from soccer practice, drinking our morning cup of coffee, doing the laundry, driving to the grocery, and mowing the lawn are all done for the love of God. Eating dinner is to acquire the energy for us to help further do God’s will, and for His love. Brother Lawrence tells us that he would not even pick up a straw from the ground, unless it was for the love of God.

So let us try to go about our day remembering we are in God’s Presence, and doing everything we do to further His will, and for His love. When we forget as Brother Lawrence did, let us not worry ourselves about it, but instead ask God’s forgiveness and for the strength to break the unholy habit of separating ourselves from Him. If we fail in our endeavors, let us confess we can never do otherwise if left to ourselves, and if we succeed, let us give thanks to God and acknowledge it came from Him.

Lenten Action

Read Section 2 of Practical Instructions for Practicing the Presence of God (PIPPG). Then during times other than dedicated prayer, practice God’s Presence in the manner outlined in the booklet or in the manner you feel obliged.

If you are a regular practitioner of contemplative prayer, during your dedicated prayer time practice the presence of God as you normally do adding the modifications, if any, you incorporated from the PIPPG suggestions.

If you are new to meditation and contemplative prayer, during your dedicated prayer time practice the presence of God as outlined in Section 1 of the PIPPG booklet.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 21th
Third Thursday of Lent – Silence is God’s First Language… So How Do We Find This Silence?

Father Thomas Keating in commenting on the insights of Saint John of the Cross, tells us that “silence is God’s first language.” You will realize how true this is if you stick with contemplative prayer. However, when you first start practicing this type of prayer you can be in a completely silent room and experience a great deal of noise. Despite wanting to be silent, our minds seem to want anything but. This, and falling asleep, are common obstacles everyone struggles with in the beginning.

So how do we stop thoughts? We do not even try! The more we try to stop thoughts the more they will come. Trying to stop thoughts is like wrestling with the pig. As the saying goes, you get dirty and the pig seems to like it. So what are we doing with this type of prayer? We are learning to ignore thoughts. When we quit paying so much attention to thoughts, they subside. We focus on short prayers, the breath, bodily sensations, or sounds and keep returning to our object of focus every time we notice our attention has drifted. Eventually, we will learn to sit with an alert awareness of nothing at all. We will rest with our attention “de-focused”. Instead of focusing on thought, or thoughts about things of the world, we will let our attention rest at its source (the center of our being). Contemplatives call this resting in God. Habit will always try to pull us away from our center and back out to our thoughts. We learn to surrender over and over again, each time de-focusing back to our center, and we begin to understand what Jesus meant by the peace that surpasses all understanding.

Let us turn to our old friend Brother Lawrence for insight on this matter:
“…you are not the only one that is troubled with wandering thoughts. Our mind is extremely roving; but as the will is mistress of all our faculties, she must recall them, and carry them to God as their last end. When the mind, for want of being sufficiently reduced by recollection, at our first engaging in devotion, has contracted certain bad habits of wandering and dissipation, they are difficult to overcome, and commonly draw us, even against our wills, to things of the earth. I believe one remedy for this is to confess our faults and to humble ourselves before God… Hold yourself in prayer before God like a dumb or paralytic beggar at a rich man’s gate. If [your mind] sometimes wanders and withdraws itself from Him, do not much disquiet yourself for that; trouble and disquiet serve rather to distract the mind than to re-collect it; the will must bring it back in tranquility. If you persevere in this manner, God will have pity on you.”

Lenten Action

Practice your daily meditation and contemplative prayer as instructed in the Practical Instructions for Practicing the Presence of God (PIPPG) booklet or in such a manner as you feel compelled. After your silent prayer session, re-read this email and rest with it for a while. At times other than dedicated prayer, practice God’s Presence as suggested above and in the PIPPG booklet.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 22nd
Third Friday of Lent – Everything in This World Constantly Changes but God. God Alone is Enough!

“Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you. All things are passing away: God never changes. With patience all things are possible; whoever has God lacks nothing: God alone suffices.”

Saint Teresa of Avila

Saint Teresa is one of our Church doctors and a great authority on prayer and practicing God’s presence. In her famous poem she shares God given insight and wisdom. Let us examine it:

- **Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you.** If our faith is sufficient and we have abandoned ourselves to our Lord, and we trust that the present moment reveals the will of God and we accept its contents as divine providence, then nothing disturbs us.

- **All things are passing away.** Everything changes and nothing is permanent. We know this truth in our hearts. Yet, our minds deny it. We go about as if things will last forever. Look closely at all that is around you. Everything is changing and each object’s change effects every other object around it. The entire world is interwoven. Each object changes constantly and as each domino falls it bumps against the next. The warp and weft of the intertwined tapestry undulate in God’s eternal present moment.

- **God never changes.** God alone is unchanging. What in our experience do we know as eternal, everywhere and unchanging? Returning to Saint Paul’s description of God as being *that in which we live and move and have our being*, we can think of God as the container in which the changing world happens? Of course, we cannot conceptualize God as that is beyond our mental ability; however, might we think of the eternal present moment and the space in which everything happens as a pointer to God’s presence? Are not space and the present moment eternal, unchanging, and inconceivable by the human mind? All the bombs in the world could go off in them and not disturb this great Stillness.

- **With patience all things are possible; whoever has God lacks nothing.** If we accept the circumstances resulting in the moment as God’s will for us, and we work to carry out His will, and we know that all is from God and for God, we will not want for anything. **God alone suffices.**

**Lenten Action**

Practice your daily meditation and contemplative prayer as instructed in the Practical Instructions for Practicing the Presence of God (PIPPG) booklet or in such a manner as you feel compelled. After your silent prayer session, re-read this email and rest with it for a while. At times other than dedicated prayer, practice God’s Presence as suggested above and in the PIPPG booklet.

Today should be a Fast day if you are physically able. Everyone should abstain from eating meat and limit the amount of food one eats. Remember not to watch TV, use computers or your phones to access computer games or unnecessary apps. Please avoid using social media.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 23nd
Third Saturday of Lent - Know Who You Really Are

“What you’re looking for is where you’re looking from.” Saint Francis of Assisi

After you have practiced meditation and contemplative prayer for a while, you will likely notice a distancing quality; space begins to grow between “you” and your thoughts. Most people completely identify who they are with what they think. After some months of praying as outlined in this challenge, you will start to “know” your thoughts as you know your sensory inputs. When you smell coffee brewing, there is you and there is the smell of coffee. Similarly, one day you will be resting in silence and a thought will float by like a cloud in the blue sky. There will be you and there will be the thought. Hopefully you will appreciate this great gift when it is given to you.

When you notice this separation, rest in the part of you that is doing the noticing. This is your center. Repeatedly resting here will further build the distancing between the deeper you and the thought-made you. Over time, if you keep practicing prayer as taught in this challenge, you will dis-identify with your thoughts. Of course, you will still be able to think. In fact, you will be able to think clearer than ever before. You will use your mind instead of your mind using you. Then, if you remain vigilant and watchful, you can more easily deny yourself as Jesus instructed. No longer will you identify with every urge and impulse, with every judgement of your neighbor, with every doubt of your self-worth. Those types of thoughts may still occur, but it will be easier to choose whether-or-not to listen to them.

In his book, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Thomas Merton called this thought-made self, this story we tell ourselves about who we are, the “false self” and referred to the deeper self that “sees” our thoughts as the “True Self”. We will further explore this terminology later in the challenge.

**Lenten Action**

In addition to your daily meditation and contemplative practice, take some quiet time to investigate your sense of self. Before your daily prayer time, sit with eyes closed and feel what it is like to be in your skin. Feel your body from the inside. Put your attention in your feet. Can you feel the aliveness coursing through them? Investigate any sensations. Consider if you did not have feet. Of course it would be unfortunate, but would your foundational sense of existing, your fundamental sense of being alive, still be there? Move throughout your body from one part to the next. Are your arms fundamental to your sense of being? Are your hands? Keep this up until you get to that part of you where you reside. This is your center. Rest, keeping your attention there. Said another way, rest with your attention on the place from where your attention originates. Stay there. Every time your thoughts hook your attention, gently and without judgement bring your attention back to your center. Pray from there. Go there as often as you can. Live from there, for at your deep center your heart communes with God. This is where you realize the distinction between thoughts and the deeper you, the difference between your false and True Self.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.”
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 24nd
Third Sunday of Lent – Love the Lord Your God with All Your Heart

“The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul… Our greatest need is to be silent before this great God…for the only language he hears is the silent language of love.” From *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross.*

In the gospels, Jesus speaks often of love. In John 15:9 He says “As the Father has loved me, so I loved you. Abide in my love.” In Luke 10:27 Jesus teaches, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, love your neighbor as yourself.” And there are so many more teachings from Jesus on love. Love and adoration of the Father, and of each other, could be said to be Jesus’ central teaching.

Can meditation and contemplative prayer help us to love? YES! It is the main reason we do it. As we continue to pray in this manner, our false-self begins to be exposed for what it is and our sense of separateness diminishes. We begin to realize everything we experience shapes our “surface sense” of who we are. The thoughts that show up like popcorn popping in our head, have at their roots the life experiences we have been subjected to. We start to realize others undergo the same upheaval of thoughts and feel compassion for them, regardless of their level of sin. We know at their core, they too have this deeper self, they too are made in the image of God. We see that their life experiences and their corresponding thoughts and beliefs about those experiences, has played out over time and made them who they think they are. This has resulted in their sense of self, their sense of values, their sense of reality, and created their unique perspective which causes them to act as they do. We feel true compassion, not pity. We begin to know, deep in our hearts, they too are children of God. We start to realize loving our neighbor as ourself is very doable.

Jesus prayed to God, “that all may be one, even as thou Father, in me and I in thee; that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that thou has sent me.” John 17:21.

**Lenten Action**

Before concluding your daily meditation and contemplative practice, take some extra time in prayer to build Love. Sitting comfortably, with eyes closed, ask Jesus to be with you and help free you from worldly worries. Ask our Lady to allow you to feel love for Jesus as she feels it for her Son. Ask St. Joseph to help you see all in unity as Jesus prayed. Then repeat a shortened version of these prayers silently to yourself. With your in-breath say, “Jesus” and on the out-breath, “Mercy”. With the next in-breath, “Mary”, and on the out-breath, “Love”. On the next in-breath, “Joseph” and on the exhale, “Union”. Repeat these three prayers over and over concentrating deeply on each breath and each word as it forms in your mind. When praying “Love”, look inside yourself for that warm feeling of Love. If you need to, remember an experience where you felt great love: a kiss from your child, holding your newborn baby, puppy breath. Know the love you feel is from God. Then love God right back with that same love. God in-turn will return it to you and you will feel more love. Keep going like this for as long as you feel comfortable. When finished, rest in the Stillness for a few minutes.

Today is not a Fast day or a day to abstain from anything including TV, computer games, social media or other forms of electronic media on your phones and Ipads. Have fun playing in the electronic world if you like, but try to find where God is in all this for you.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 25nd
Third Monday of Lent – The Sacrament of the Present Moment, Faith and Trust in God

In the Catholic classic, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, Jean-Pierre de Caussade writes “There is not a moment in which God does not present Himself under the cover of some pain to be endured, of some consolation to be enjoyed, or of some duty to be performed. All that takes place within us, around us, or through us, contains and conceals His divine action.”

This book’s message dovetails nicely with our study of Brother Lawrence. Both emphasize an intense faith that God is at work in the present moment and His will is continuously being done. They both make it clear that faith is far more than a belief in something, it is a deep trust in life and that God’s hand is in all that life brings us.

When we believe we are separate and act independent of God, we try to do our will instead of God’s will, and we cause misery for ourselves and others. It is our belief in this false separate-from-God-self, this mind-made conceptual sense of who we are, that causes all our troubles. We constantly try in vain to hang on to this thought-made self, to build it up, to make it more real, and to preserve it. As we try to defend the false-selves that we use as fronts to the world, we become fearful, selfish and needy. The betterment of this false-self becomes our purpose, our motivating force, our false god.

When we are truly present with all our attention on the moment at hand, the false-self is temporarily suspended. The more often we can concentrate on God’s presence, focus on His will as it is revealed to us in each moment, and do everything for His love, the less identified we become with our mind-made self-image. But we cannot be more holy than we currently are and it takes time to break the habit of separating ourselves from God. To do so we must practice God’s presence constantly so as to establish a new habit of feeling God presence with us, and while doing so we must be patient, and persevere as we cannot go faster than God’s grace.

**Lenten Action**
Before concluding your daily meditation and contemplative practice, take some extra time in prayer to investigate your thought-made sense of self. Sitting comfortably, with eyes closed, ask Jesus to be with you and guide you through this meditation. Ask yourself, “Who am I”? If an answer like, business man, teacher, or real-estate agent pops into your head, consider that may be what you do but not who you really are deep down. Re-ask the question, “Who am I”? If a mother, a father, a son, or a daughter pop in, consider whether that is a role you play or is that really who you are deep down? What if that identity was suddenly taken away? Would you still exist? Re-ask, “Who am I”? Continue like this digging deeper and deeper into the core of your being. Go inside yourself. In a manner similar to the meditation we did Saturday, make your way through your various body parts asking “Who am I”? Work your way to your center and ask “Who am I”? The true answer to this question probably won’t come in words. Rest at your center and ask “Who am I”? Remain at your center, asking and listening for God’s answer for as long as you feel comfortable. When finished, rest in the Stillness for a few minutes.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 26th
Third Tuesday of Lent – Be Patient - Perseverance is the Key to Success

The spiritual journey is a long and challenging one. But always remember that any effort we make to draw closer to God is never in vain. Once a seed is planted it takes time to grow. If we constantly pull it up and examine the roots, we will stunt its growth; and so it is with our spiritual progress. Plant your seeds, tend them carefully and faithfully, and allow God’s light to make the miracle happen. Have patience; perseverance is the key to success.

If we persevere, by meditating and praying every day, remembering God often, and returning over and over to an awareness of His Presence, an ability to sense him deeply will develop. Before long, it will start to get easier to remain in His presence. Eventually, a Holy habit of residing in God’s Presence will form. One day looking back we will realize, it is harder now to not be in God’s presence then it once was to be there.

When navigating our spiritual journey, let us always make our north star the love of God. As we go about our day, let us do everything for that love; not for ourselves, not for the opinions of others, but solely for the love of God. Remember, we do not necessarily have to change what we do, only the intent behind why we do it.

All God wants is our Love. Ironically, all we really want is his love too. We mistakenly try to fill the God sized hole in our hearts with a love for worldly things, which will never really suffice. Know that God is aching for our love and when we give it, He will give it right back. Do all you do for this love, and then feed the love you feel from Him right back to its source. The Love will grow and God’s Presence will be everywhere.

May we make ourselves open to God’s grace and always know His presence.

**Lenten Action**

Practice your daily meditation and contemplative prayer as instructed in the Practical Instructions for Practicing the Presence of God (PIPPG) booklet or in such a manner as you feel compelled. After your silent prayer session, re-read this email and rest with it for a while. At times other than dedicated prayer, practice God’s Presence as suggested above and in the PIPPG booklet.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.
Our spiritual journey starts before we are born. “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you...” (Jeremiah 1:5) With grace, blessings and an openness to see God in everything, our lives are transformed through our experiences. Our own eyes have seen how God has worked in our lives. Brother Lawrence’s conversion through seeing a tree in winter remained within him throughout his life and he shared that vision. Do you only believe in ‘coincidence’ or have you seen ‘miracles’ around you that are from God? And are you willing to share with other people? Are you willing to share them with your children and grandchildren? Like Brother Lawrence, have you seen something or experienced something that so changed your life and brought to God in some special way? How have you seen God work in your life? If you are like most people, our miracles happen and are seen best in the ordinary. Saint Josemarie Escriva said it best when he said: “Understand this well: there is something holy, something divine hidden in the most ordinary situations, and it is up to each one of you to discover it”

Write in a journal the times when you noticed God working in your life. How can you share that with your children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, nieces, nephews, cousins, or any family member? Share with family or friends how God works in your life in the most ordinary ways. Be attentive to the present moment and be aware of God’s PRESENCE. Meditate about how you might share your conversion moments.

**Lenten Action:** If you are a regular practitioner of Contemplative prayer spend your normal time in such prayer.

If you are new to spending time in silent prayer, sit comfortably in a quiet place, and ask God to be with you and help you silence your thoughts. Concentrate on your breath going in and out and feel the rising and falling of your chest. Feel the rhythm of your breathing, and as you do bring your contemplation to feeling God’s Presence. Sit for 10 minutes silently. Remain at peace and let go of any intruding wayward thoughts bringing yourself back to the quiet Presence of God in you.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 28, 2019
Thursday Third Week of Lent

Oh, that today you would listen to His voice! Do not harden your hearts as at Mer’i-bah, as on the day of Mas’sah in the wilderness. Psalm 95: 7-8

Many times we sing the responsorial psalm, ‘If Today You Hear His Voice, Harden not Your Hearts’ Do you have a hardened heart… a place where you are not kind or loving… a place where you are not open to receive God’s graces in what is in front of you?

Today marks the halfway point of Lent. Yeah! Lent is about prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Prayer is intimacy with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit—the Trinity. “Prayer is nothing but a desire of the heart. If your desire is continuous, your prayer is continuous. Do you wish never to cease praying? Then never cease desiring.” -St. Augustine - Fasting can be anything we avoid to ‘offer it up’ and deny ourselves, but it can also be giving up a way of acting like fasting from unkind behavior. Almsgiving is generous charitable works that include making donations of money to the needy or other charitable causes, or it can be making a gift of time and energy to others. So, how are we doing at this halfway point in Lent? If we are like the Israelites in the desert, we may be grumbling about now. (Exodus 17:1-7) We might be complaining it is too hard to fast from things; it takes too long to sit in silence… I am not getting anything out of this! Or, oh yea, reading scripture is boring… Or the BIG Excuse of all Excuses: I have too much to do. (Read March 7th reflection again!)

Have you carved out prayer time in your daily life to hear God’s voice? It’s never too late to start. Taking time to be prayerful, sitting in silence, combining fasting from noise with fasting, and giving alms makes time for spiritual growth. Our souls are like gardens, growth takes time and nurturing. God desires a relationship with us; we do this by spending time with Him in prayer to be with Him. Perhaps at this halfway point, we have heard His voice and our hearts have softened. Perhaps we formed a better relationship with God that we want to preserve and improve. The parish has a resource, FORMED on Demand that has a video, “Into the Desert: A Lenten Study on Prayer,” which explains prayer and how to use Lectio Divina in order to have a conversation with God. Watch this video if you can or you can look praying using Lectio Divina by googling it or read the attached description. Read today’s scripture slowly & prayerfully. Pick one of the following scriptural readings and rest in it in the silence of your heart for a while using Lectio Divina: Jeremiah 7:23-28, Psalm 95, and Luke 11:14-23. Write in your journal how God spoke to you in these readings. Consider about how you might share your Lenten experience.

**Lenten Action:** If you are a regular practitioner of Contemplative prayer spend your normal time in such prayer. If you are new to spending time in silent prayer, get comfortable and in the silence of your heart ask God to come to you and silence your thoughts. Focus on your breathing & feel the rising and falling of your chest, as you fill your lungs and expel your breath. Bring your contemplation to feeling God’s Presence.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.
"Lectio Divina", a Latin term, means "divine reading" and describes a way of reading the Scriptures whereby we gradually let go of our own agenda and open ourselves to what God wants to say to us. In the 12th century, a Carthusian monk called Guigo, described the stages which he saw as essential to the practice of Lectio Divina. There are various ways of practicing Lectio Divina either individually or in groups but Guigo’s description remains fundamental.

He said that the first stage is lectio (reading) where we read the Word of God, slowly and reflectively so that it sinks into us. Any passage of Scripture can be used for this way of prayer but the passage should not be too long.

The second stage is meditatio (reflection) where we think about the text we have chosen and ruminate upon it so that we take from it what God wants to give us.

The third stage is oratio (response) where we leave our thinking aside and simply let our hearts speak to God. This response is inspired by our reflection on the Word of God.

The final stage of Lectio Divina is contemplatio (rest) where we let go not only of our own ideas, plans and meditations but also of our holy words and thoughts. We simply rest in the Word of God. We listen at the deepest level of our being to God who speaks within us with a still small voice. As we listen, we are gradually transformed from within. Obviously this transformation will have a profound effect on the way we actually live and the way we live is the test of the authenticity of our prayer. We must take what we read in the Word of God into our daily lives.

These stages of Lectio Divina are not fixed rules of procedure but simply guidelines as to how the prayer normally develops. Its natural movement is towards greater simplicity, with less and less talking and more listening. Gradually the words of Scripture begin to dissolve and the Word is revealed before the eyes of our heart. How much time should be given to each stage depends very much on whether it is used individually or in a group. If Lectio Divina is used for group prayer, obviously more structure is needed than for individual use. In group prayer, much will depend on the type of group. Lectio
Divina may involve discussing the implications of the Word of God for daily life but it cannot be reduced to this. The movement of the prayer is towards silence. If the group is comfortable with silence, more time could be spent resting in the Word.

The practice of Lectio Divina as a way of praying the Scriptures has been a fruitful source of growing in relationship with Christ for many centuries and in our own day is being rediscovered by many individuals and groups. The Word of God is alive and active and will transform each of us if we open ourselves to receive what God wants to give us.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 29, 2019
Friday Third Week of Lent

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all you soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength”. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Mark 12:30-31

Look at the cross at the top of this page. Our lives take on the form of the cross. The vertical beam is our relationship with God while the horizontal beam is our connection to others.¹ Jesus died on the cross for our redemption. God loves us! We can’t earn, buy or steal His love. It is a free gift, free grace! We are given two greatest commandments to follow - to love God and our neighbor. How do we love God with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength? We show God our love by our daily behavior & decisions, & our love and respect for others by recognizing the image of God in them and loving them as you love yourself. Sounds easy? But how do we get to know and love our God who hides from us? Reading scripture, observing the beauty of creation, spending time in prayer and contemplation are a few ways. The Examen, an Ignatian exercise, helps us reflect or examine our day and see where we saw God, who and how we interacted with others and how we lived the message of peace, charity and love. The Examen allows us to see missed opportunities of being the best version of ourselves.

Brother Lawrence made the love of God the end of all his actions; like he would not pick up straw from the ground except out of the love of God. His day in the kitchen and everything he did working there was done out of the love of God. We can make our daily routine a prayer and an offering of love.

“Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.”

St. Mother Teresa


**Lenten Action:** If you are a regular practitioner of Contemplative prayer spend your normal time in such prayer.

If you are new to spending time in silent prayer, sit comfortably in a quiet place, and ask God to be with you and help you silence your thoughts. Concentrate on your breath going in and out and feel the rising and falling of your chest. Feel the rhythm of your breathing, and as you do bring your contemplation to feeling God’s Presence. Sit for 10 minutes silently. Remain at peace and let go of any intruding wayward thoughts bringing yourself back to the quiet Presence of God in you.

Today should be a Fast day if you are physically able. Everyone should abstain from eating meat today and limit the amount of food one eats. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.

¹ Melinda Knight, “The Shape of the Cross,” in The Magnificat Lenten Companion, March 6-April 21, 2019, p 38
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 30, 2019
Saturday Third Week of Lent

“O God, be merciful to me a sinner”
Luke 18:13

Here Luke takes us to the temple where the Pharisee prays, “O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity- or even like this tax collector.” The tax collector beats his breast, not even raising his eyes to heaven and prays “O God, be merciful to me a sinner.” The tax collector is aware of his transgressions and pleads for pardon. This is a heartfelt petition, a contrite and humbled prayer from the heart. We are all sinners. The desert fathers tell us that judging others is a heavy burden. In Luke 6:37, 41-42, he tells us not to judge others for the splinter in their eye, especially because we do not notice the beam in our own eye.

“A sinner’s awareness of sin is one requisite for his recovery; the other is his longing for God. When we long for God, we do so not as sinners, but as lovers.”
-Bishop Fulton Sheen

When we admit that we are sinners, we have more compassion for others. At the beginning of Mass in the penitential rite, we confess that “…we have greatly sinned, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do…” When we participate at Mass, we say the greatest prayer-for the Mass includes vocal, meditative, and contemplative prayer. The Mass uses forms of prayer to express our love of God. Through contemplative prayer, a prayer of the heart, we begin to know ourselves. It is in listening to the inner voice of God in our heart that we come to know ourselves, and as Fr. Dan recently encouraged us to do, we will discover the splinters we have in our eyes that prevent us from seeing the splendor of God. Like the Pharisee, we often think we are better than others; which makes us prideful; and is one of the seven deadly sins.

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.”
Psalm 51:10 (NRSV)

Reflect on how you have sinned by thought, word, deed or omission lately. Sin is anything that separates us from God. Make time for confession this week with a repentant heart.

**Lenten Action:** If you are a regular practitioner of Contemplative prayer spend your normal time in such prayer.

If you are new to spending time in silent prayer, sit comfortably in a quiet place, and ask God to be with you and help you silence your thoughts. Concentrate on your breath going in and out and feel the rising and falling of your chest. Feel the rhythm of your breathing, and as you do bring your contemplation to feeling God’s Presence. Sit for 10 minutes silently. Remain at peace and let go of any intruding wayward thoughts bringing yourself back to the quiet Presence of God in you.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

March 31, 2019
Sunday Fourth Week of Lent

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you: I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”
Luke 15:21 (NRSV)

Today’s gospel is the story of the Prodigal Son. We hear about the youngest son who leaves with his share of inheritance and squanders it away. The older son is loyal, obedient and continues to work in the fields with the father. We see a father who grieves the loss of a child, continues to watch for his return and then lavishes him with gifts and a celebration upon his homecoming. Are we like the young son who seeks worldly self-fulfillment, fame, wealth and leaves God out of our lives? Or are we like the elder son who works hard, performs our duties, carries out our obligations but becomes resentful, jealous, and unkind when others receive acclamations, awards, and celebrations? How often have we been like the father-forgiving, loving, welcoming and compassionate? If we are honest with ourselves, we have been both sons, and not so much like the Father. Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest, known for his Jesus-centered spirituality, wrote ‘The Return of the Prodigal Son” According to Nouwen, our goal is to become like the father. He compares the father to God, our Father of mercy and compassion, pardon and love, tenderness and care. Our Father is slow to anger, rich in mercy. How often have we sinned against God and asked for mercy? Brother Lawrence says any penance or mortifications are invalid if they were not done for the love of God and we do not advance in the spiritual life if we neglect the love of God. Nouwen had struggles within his personal life and made a choice to seek God in solitude. In contemplation he had an epiphany: “You are the Beloved of God.” Nouwen then focused on the vastness of God’s compassion and love. He worked to share the Father’s love with the L’Arche community.

Lent is for repentance. If you haven’t been to confession recently go as soon as you can. Think about the things that separate you from God. Do you run to God like the young son with genuine sorrow or is it a check off list to get it done? Reflect on God’s love for you, can you hear God saying, “You are the Beloved of God”? Spend time with your family today; have a family dinner, game, or outing. Give them your presence and savor the moments you share with them appreciating the gift of the now that the present moment is.

Lenten Action:
If you are a regular practitioner of Contemplative prayer spend your normal time in such prayer.

If you are new to spending time in silent prayer, sit comfortably in a quiet place, and ask God to be with you and help you silence your thoughts. Concentrate on your breath going in and out and feel the rising and falling of your chest. Imagine breathing in God’s love and care. Breathe out your offer of love to God. Sit silently for 10 minutes or more.

Today is not a Fast day or a day to abstain from anything including TV, computer games, social media or other forms of electronic media on your phones and iPad. Have fun playing in the electronic world if you like, but try to find where God is in all this for you.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

April 1, 2019
Monday Fourth Week of Lent

But as for me, I will look to the Lord, I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me!

Micah 7:7 (NRSV)

The Paschal Mystery (the passion, death, resurrection of Jesus the Christ) is not an April fool’s day joke, it really happened. Our Contemplative Lenten journey is an attempt to immerse ourselves in silence of the desert for 40 days. Jesus went to the desert because He needed silence and solitude. How much time have you carved out for silence and solitude to create space for intimacy with God?

In talking about the Practice of the Presence of God, Brother Lawrence says we are to make our hearts a spiritual temple. Spiritual temples ARE Holy places. Do you think you can’t be holy? If holiness is something you believe is not possible for you, you would be wrong. YOU can be holy! Moses was a murderer and yet he is a saint. Peter denied Jesus three times in public, and yet he is a saint. Every saint is a sinner just like you. So how do you become a saint? Here is a quote by Henri Nouwen, on just that subject: “Every time you make free time for God, you clear up a bit of the descending path, and you see where you can plant your feet on the way to love. Nothing spectacular or sensational. It may be simply a matter of what you say, what you read, to whom you speak, where you go on a free afternoon, or how you regard yourself and other people. What’s fascinating is that the first step invariably makes the second one easier. You begin to discover that love begets love, and step-by-step you move further forward on the way to God. Gradually, you shed your misgivings about the way of love; you see that “in love there is no room for fear,” and you feel yourself drawn to descend deeper and deeper on the way that Jesus walked before you.”

Slowly we move closer to God and realize He loves us more than we can imagine. We then can intentionally create holy moments and do what one prayerfully believes God is calling one to do in that moment; things such as helping a sick neighbor, offering a ride, checking on a neighbor and the list is endless when you start listening and watching for the moments to do all for the love of God. Practicing the Presence of God nourishes the soul; consequently virtues such as faith, hope and love grow. As we wait in silence, our God will hear us. With little steps, we can be holy as our Father in heaven is holy! Today, look for situations where God is calling you to create holy moments. Meditate about how you might create holy moments.

Lenten Action: If you are a regular practitioner of Contemplative prayer spend your normal time in such prayer.

If you are new to spending time in silent prayer, sit comfortably in a quiet place, and ask God to be with you and help you silence your thoughts. Remain at peace and let go of any intruding wayward thoughts.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.

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1 Matthew Kelly, “The Biggest Lie in the History of Christianity: How Modern Culture is Robbing Billions of People of Happiness,” (North Palm Beach: Wellspring, 2018), Kindle edition, 381-394
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

April 2, 2019
Tuesday Fourth Week of Lent- John 5:6, 14 (NRSV)

“Do you want to be made well?” After this Jesus found him in the temple area and said to him, “See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you.”

Jesus heals the man at the pool of Bethesda who had been sick for 38 years. Sherri L. Vallee, author of Not by Bread Alone, suggests that when Jesus asks the man “Do you want to be made well,” He is really asking about becoming whole and overcoming sin. Becoming whole and overcoming sin must happen so that we can grow to be the best version of ourselves, and live up to our full potential. If Ms. Vallee is right, then the man who waited at the pool in Bethesda to be healed was longing for wholeness.

Brother Lawrence says we have a God who knows all our wants. What are your wants? What are your wants in this 40 Day Lenten Challenge? Going to the sacrament of reconciliation makes us whole because it restores us in God’s love. By confessing our sins, we know ourselves better because we had to face our sins for what they are. Through confession, we receive graces, we have peace, we have strength to avoid things that separate us from God and we become whole. St Josemaria Escriva states: “Lent should suggest to us these basic questions: Am I advancing in my faithfulness to Christ, in my desire for holiness, in a generous apostolate in my daily life, in my ordinary work among my colleagues? Each one of us, silently, should answer these questions, and we will see that we need to change again if Christ is to live in us, if Jesus’ image is to be reflected clearly in our behavior” Bishop Fulton Sheen writes: “All denial of guilt keeps people out of the area of love and, by inducing self-righteousness, prevents a cure.” Jesus tells St. Faustina “Let them [sinners] not fear to approach Me; they are in most need of My mercy.”

All of this is to say that our Lenten journey should be shaped, in part, by a desire to become whole, which will require us to face our sinfulness and our faults, and begin the work of addressing our brokenness by using confession as our first means of restoration. The second means of our restoration rests in whether we can forgive ourselves for what we have done or not done and also forgive others their offenses. A good way to view the level of forgiveness we should embrace is described by the acronym COFFEE, which means Christ Offers Forgiveness For Everyone Everywhere.

Contemplation, practicing the Presence of God, transforms us through faith, hope and love to be the best version of ourselves. So, today, we encourage you to do an examination of conscience and if you haven’t been to confession recently go as soon as you can. When you drink the morning COFFEE or tea, reflect on Jesus’ endless mercy and perhaps pray the Chaplet of Divine Mercy at 3 P.M. today

Lenten Action: If you are a regular practitioner of Contemplative prayer spend your normal time in such prayer.

If you are new to meditation and contemplative prayer, find a quiet place where you can sit comfortably and Practice the Presence of God in Section 1 of the attached Practicing the Presence of God.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.
"I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me."

John 5:30 (NRSV)

These are Jesus’ words to the Jews who were taking him to task for curing the man by the pool at Bethesada. Jesus tells us that He does the will of the Father and does nothing on His own. Brother Lawrence encourages us to follow Jesus’ example here when he says: “That we ought to give ourselves up to God, with regard both to things temporal and spiritual, and seek our satisfaction only in the fulfilling of His will, whether He lead us by suffering or consolation, for all would be equal to a soul truly resigned.”

In a time of suffering, Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, ‘Father,’ he said, ‘if you are willing, take this cup away from me. Nevertheless, let your will be done, not mine.’ While none of us will likely face the sort of suffering that Jesus is speaking about when he asks his Father in heaven to take this cup away, we all face “cups” filled with suffering in our lives. Do we pray as Jesus prays when we do?

Brother Lawrence states, “That all things are possible to him who believes, that they are less difficult to him who hopes, they are more easy to him who loves, and still more easy to him who perseveres in the practice of these three virtues.” Life is messy and we have trials and tribulations. When we love the Trinitarian God, believe in a loving Father, and have hope that God has our back, we endure the sufferings with a different outlook. Jesus modeled total trust in His Father throughout his public ministry, and he did so to give us an example of how we are to trust in our Father in heaven. Are we able to say, “Thy will be done?”

A friend makes it a habit whenever something has happened and that they aren’t particularly pleased about it, to say, “I can’t wait to see what God does with this.” Each day we have choices for God or against God, and each of these choices is a chance to do and accept God’s will. Today, reflect on your life; consider the times when you have followed and strayed from God’s will. Write in your journal the trials and tribulations in your life. Did you respond with faith, hope and love? Look for ways to follow God’s will today and create ‘holy moments’. (Holy moments: do what one prayerfully believes God is calling one to do in that moment.)

**Lenten Action:** If you are a regular practitioner of Contemplative prayer spend your normal time in such prayer.

If you are new to spending time in silent prayer, sit comfortably in a quiet place, and ask God to be with you and help you silence your thoughts. Remain at peace and let go of any intruding wayward thoughts bringing yourself back to the quiet Presence of God in you.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

April 4, 2019
Thursday Fourth Week of Lent

“I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” Jeremiah 31:33

This scripture is our communion antiphon today. How does God plant His law in our hearts? One way is through Holy Scriptures.

Henri Nouwen wrote: "To take the Holy Scriptures and read them is the first thing we have to do to open ourselves to God's call. Reading the scriptures is not as easy as it seems since in our academic world we tend to make anything and everything we read subject to analysis and discussion. But the word of God should lead us first of all to contemplation and meditation. Instead of taking the words apart, we should bring them together in our inner most being; instead of wondering if we agree or disagree, we should wonder which words are directly spoken to us and connect directly with our personal story. Instead of thinking about the words as potential subjects for an interesting dialogue or paper, we should be willing to let them penetrate into the most hidden corners of our heart, even to those places where no other word has yet found entrance. Then and only then can the word bear fruit as seed sown in rich soil. Only then can we really 'hear and understand' (Matt 13:23)." This is what sacred reading or praying with Holy Scripture is all about, and it is what we do in Lectio Divina.

Today is the feast day of St. Isidore of Seville, one of the Doctors of the Church. St. John Paul II made St. Isidore patron saint of the internet in 1997! St. Isidore tells us: “If a man wants to be always in God’s company, he must pray regularly and read regularly. When we pray, we talk to God; when we read, God talks to us.” Thomas Merton tells us that the Desert Fathers applied themselves to the love and service of God which expressed itself in the love of God’s word. The word of God gives us insight into our Trinitarian God. Lectio Divina is one way we take the scriptures and apply it to our lives. It is ‘divine reading’. We read, listen, meditate, pray and then contemplate. Read today’s scripture praying it using Lectio Divina. Ask God to send the Holy Spirit to you while reading scripture. Use the sheet describing Lectio that we sent out with the reflection on 3/28 as your guide. Praying using Lectio Divina can open the scriptures to you in new ways that will draw you closer to God. Remember that the goal of praying with the Scriptures using Lectio is not to complete a certain amount of text or reading, but to connect with God by reading His words.

**Lenten Action:** If you are a regular practitioner of Contemplative prayer spend your normal time in such prayer.

If you are new to meditation and contemplative prayer, read Section 1, pages 6-8 of Practical Instructions for Practicing the Presence of God. Sit for 10 minutes silently. Remain at peace and let go of any intruding wayward thoughts bringing yourself back to the quiet Presence of God in you.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

April 5, 2019
Friday Fourth Week of Lent

“Let us beset the just one, because he is obnoxious to us; he sets himself against our doings, reproaches us for transgressions of the law and charges us with violations of our training.”

Wisdom 2:12 NAB

How do we respond when others criticize our behavior? Do we become defensive and self-justifying? When we are in the wrong, are we threatened by what others say? Or rather, do we listen to what they say, mull it over and sift what is truthful and look at our actions using their perspective to evaluate our conduct? Are we the ones judging others and critical of them because we want to feel superior to them when they are going in the way of good and right acts? Socrates said, “Know Thyself.” Silence and solitude with contemplation helps us know ourselves. We are both a mixture of saints and sinners! In Practicing the Presence of God, Brother Lawrence says: “We must carefully examine ourselves to see which virtues we are in most need of and which we find the hardest to acquire. We should also take note of the sins that we most frequently fall into and what occasions contribute to our fall.” Henri Nouwen writes: “I am not saying there is an easy solution to our ambivalent relationship with God. Solitude is not a solution. It is a direction. The direction is pointed to by the prophet Elijah, who did not find Yahweh in the mighty wind, the earthquake, the fire, but in the still, small voice; this direction, too, is indicated by Jesus, who chose solitude as the place to be with his Father. Every time we enter into solitude we withdraw from our windy, earthquakes, fiery lives and open ourselves to the great encounter. The first thing we often discover in solitude is our own restlessness, our drivenness, and compulsiveness, our urge to act quickly, to make an impact, and to have influence; and often we find it very hard to withstand the temptation to return as quickly as possible to the world of “relevance.” But when we persevere with the help of a gentle discipline, we slowly come to hear the still, small voice and to feel the gentle breeze, and so come to know the Lord of our heart, soul, and mind, the Lord who makes us see who we really are.”

So, do you know yourself? Are you aware of your virtues and vices? Spend time in solitude today and contemplate how well you know yourself. We often point out each other’s qualities and shortcomings better than our own. Journaling is a form of prayer, journal your discoveries. Attend the Stations of the Cross today.

Lenten Action: If you are a regular practitioner of Contemplative prayer spend your normal time in such prayer.

If you are new to meditation and contemplative prayer, read Section 1, pages 6-8 of Practical Instructions for Practicing the Presence of God. Sit for 10 minutes silently. Remain at peace and let go of any intruding wayward thoughts bringing yourself back to the quiet Presence of God in you.

Today should be a Fast day if you are physically able. Everyone should abstain from eating meat today and limit the amount of food one eats. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.
Yet I, like a trusting lamb led to slaughter, had not realized that they were hatching plots against me: “Let us destroy the tree in its vigor; let us cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name will be spoken no more.”

Jer 11:18-20

These words of Jeremiah are taken from the first reading for today. Jeremiah was known as the weeping prophet because he was a gentle, kindhearted man who was given a mission to speak the hard truth to the people of Judah who were unrepentant sinners. As Peter Kreeft said; “He set his face like flint (Is 50:7) to deliver God’s message intact. But the task made his heart break into tears for the message was judgement of the people both he and God loved dearly.” Among other things he was beaten, put into stocks, humiliated, starved, and thrown down a well. How could such a kindhearted man deliver such a harsh message and endure the many trials that Jeremiah faced? It was his deep prayer life that led to a close personal relationship with God that brought him that grace. In his love of God, he saw the great love that God had for His people, and mirrored in himself that love. Jeremiah’s love of God was so great he could not stop from delivering God’s message to the Israelites no matter the risks to himself. “The word of the LORD”, he said “has brought me derision and reproach all the day. I say to myself, I will not mention him, I will speak in his name no more. But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it.”

While we are not being called to deliver such a stern message as Jerimiah, we are still called by our baptism to be prophets in our age. To bear witness to the love of God in a society that more and more denies the very existence of God. How can we have the courage and grace to be such prophets? Prayer.

Cardinal Robert Sarah, the Perfect of the Congregation for Divine Worship, in speaking on prayer said the following; “Prayer is, in the first place the work of the Holy Spirit, who prays in us, reshapes us interiorly, and plunges us into the depths of the One and Triune God. This is why it is essential to keep silence and to listen, to agree to be stripped of our possessions and to give ourselves up to God, who is present in us. What matters in prayer is not our talking but managing to be silent so as to let the Holy Spirit speak, to listen to him sighing and interceding on our behalf. If we enter into the mysterious silence of the Holy Spirit, our prayers will certainly be heard because we have a listening heart.” Resolve today to discipline yourself to silence. Ask for the grace to be silent interiorly, to allow the Holy Spirit to reshape you so that the Word of God is like a fire burning in your heart.

**Lenten Action**

If you are a regular practitioner of contemplative prayer, during your dedicated prayer time practice the presence of God as you normally do adding the modifications, if any, you incorporated from the PIPPG suggestions.

If you are new to meditation and contemplative prayer, during your dedicated prayer time practice the presence of God as outlined in Section 1 of the PIPPG booklet.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

April 7
Sunday – Fifth Week of Lent

Jesus looked up and said, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She replied, “No one sir.” Then Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go and from now on do not sin anymore.” Jn 8:10-11

Around the third century AD, there developed in Christianity a movement of people away from population centers into the deserts. These men and women were driven by a desire to deepen their relationship with God and so, like Jesus at the start of his ministry, went into the desert to reduce the distractions of the world so that they could spend more time with God. These men and women became known as the desert fathers and mothers. These hermits became spiritual masters of all aspects of the spiritual life. St. Anthony the Great was the first of these to develop a rule for living in community. The wisdom of the desert fathers and mothers had a major influence on the development of Christianity. Many of the teachings of these monastics have come down to us through the centuries. Over these last meditations we will be examining some of them to help us gain insight into our own prayer life.

These words of John’s gospel (above) are from the well-known story of the woman caught in adultery, our gospel reading for this Sunday. When I picture this scene in my mind, I see the woman standing with her head bowed, her face dusty from the courtyard, through which she had be dragged. Tear tracks running through that dust, down her face. The tears falling in great drops to the ground, punctuating the writing of Jesus who is kneeling at her feet. How those tears must have changed from ones of fear to tears of joy as she witnessed her accusers leaving and Jesus looking up, a loving expression on His face, as he says “Neither do I condemn you.”

Evagrius the Solitary, one of the desert fathers had this to say about prayer; “first pray for the gift of tears, so that through sorrowing you may tame what is savage in your soul. And having confessed your transgressions to the Lord, you will obtain forgiveness from Him. Pray with tears and all you ask will be heard. For the Lord rejoices greatly when you pray with tears.” This saying is at the heart of the Church’s practice of the examination of conscience. Spend some time today if front of a crucifix, reflecting on the broken wounded body of Christ. See in your mind’s eye what he would have saw from that cross, how the sweat and blood from his forehead stung his eyes, blurring His vision of his Mother and the beloved disciple. Hear what He heard; the buzzing of flies around his ears, tickling him to distraction but having no way to drive them off. Try to think of all five of His senses and what He would have experienced through them. Then consider your sins and pray for remorse, that gift of tears. Pray to hear the words he spoke to the woman; Neither do I condemn you.

Lenten Action

If you are a regular practitioner of contemplative prayer, during your dedicated prayer time practice the presence of God as you normally do adding the modifications, if any, you incorporated from the PIPPG suggestions.

If you are new to meditation and contemplative prayer, during your dedicated prayer time practice the presence of God as outlined in Section 1 of the PIPPG booklet.

Today is not a Fast day or a day to abstain from anything including TV, computer games, social media or other forms of electronic media on your phones and Ipads. Have fun playing in the electronic world if you like, but try to find God in all you do.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

April 8
Monday – Fifth Week of Lent

Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. Jn 8:1-2

A professor was once asked to speak to a class on the subject of time management. He took a pot in which he put in several large rocks that filled the pot to the top. He asked the class if the pot was full. When they answered yes, he took out some gravel and poured it into the pot until it once again seemed full. He then poured in sand filling the space around the rocks and gravel. Next, he took water and poured it in filling all available space. When he asked the class what the point of the exercise was the answer, he got was that there was always time to squeeze in one more thing in a busy day. No, the professor replied, the point is that if you do not put the big rocks in the pot first, you will never get them to fit later. For Jesus, prayer was the biggest rock in his life. In everything he did, he made time for prayer. It should be that way in our lives as well.

Our scripture passage is the opening line of our gospel reading from yesterday. I would like to stay with that reading today and again tomorrow as the story of the lady caught in adultery has much to teach us about prayer life of Jesus. Take your bible and spend a few moments slowly reading again the story. It is in John chapter 8, verses 1-11. Notice how chapter 8 begins with a clause and not the entire sentence …but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. The verses just prior are speaking about the unresolved issue of Jesus among the chief priests and Pharisees. The scene ends with each going to their own house, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. The Mount of Olives was the place where Jesus rested; where he went to pray while in Jerusalem. His days where filled with noise. The temple area was generally filled with people, especially when he was there preaching. The mount of Olives was his fortress of solitude, the place where he could be with the Father in the cool evening, through the watches of the night, and the early morning. Notice that Jesus made time for prayer in his life, while the passage implies that the chief priests and Pharisees did not. Notice too how in the temple area the next day, how calm, and relaxed Jesus is during the confrontation and how uptight and fearful the scribes and Pharisees seem to be. In making time for prayer Jesus remains in the Father and the Father in him, and with this indwelling comes light. The Triune God resides in us as well and with prayer we learn how to look at God so that the light is in us as well. And as St. Athanasius says of prayer, were the light is, there is radiance; and where the radiance is, there is its active energy and luminous grace. Grace to allow us to face the trials of our lives with equanimity. Like Jesus, is your prayer the biggest rock in your life? If not, why not? Do you have a Mount of Olives, a place for prayer in your home? If not find a quiet nook to place a chair, a candle, and a crucifix and use it for your time in prayer.

Lenten Action

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40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

April 9
Tuesday – Fifth Week of Lent

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” And once more he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. Jn 8:6-8

One last time we return to Sunday’s gospel. The story of the woman caught in adultery. Here Jesus is showing us the power of humility. St. Bede, in a homily, once said; “Christ, who twice bends down to write on the ground, teaches us to bend low in humility to examine ourselves both before and after addressing the faults of our neighbor. If his example becomes our practice, we will avoid as he did the extremes of being unjust and unmerciful toward others.”

In her book, No Greater Love, Mother Teresa wrote: “Jesus taught us how to pray, and He also told us to learn from Him, to be meek and humble of heart. Neither of these can we do unless we know what silence is. Both humility and prayer grow from an ear, mind, and tongue that have lived in silence with God, for in the silence of the heart God speak.”

As we rest in the silence of our hearts, we begin to see ourselves in right relation with God. We see Him who by His nature, is all good, all holy, purest of all, all merciful. In retrospect we see how far from God we are. We, by our nature are not even close to being good, holy, pure, or merciful and all we can do is cry out; “Lord I am not worthy.”

So, we learn at feet of the Master. Jesus ask us to imitate Him in only one way; His humility. In Humility of the Heart, Fr Cajetan tells us; “No greater example can be given than that of Jesus when the Word was made flesh. Nothing can be more sublime than the beginning of St. John’s gospel; “In the beginning was the Word”. No abasement can be deeper than that which follows; “and the Word was made flesh.”

Today, spend some time with the poetry of St. Paul’s beautiful description of the humility of Christ and His resultant exaltation. It can be found in Philippians 2:6-11. Ponder these words in your heart and reflect on ways you might imitate that humility. Read through Mother Teresa’s list of ways to practice humility. It can be found here; https://www.catholiccompany.com/getfed/mother-teresas-humility-list-5880. Better yet see the attachment if you do not want to follow the link.

Lenten Action

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Mother Teresa's Humility List

Sep 03, 2016 By Gretchen Filz

“Humility is the mother of all virtues; purity, charity and obedience. It is in being humble that our love becomes real, devoted and ardent. If you are humble nothing will touch you, neither praise nor disgrace, because you know what you are. If you are blamed you will not be discouraged. If they call you a saint you will not put yourself on a pedestal.” - Mother Teresa of Calcutta

SAINT MOTHER TERESA'S HUMILITY LIST

1. Speak as little as possible about yourself.
2. Keep busy with your own affairs and not those of others.
3. Avoid curiosity.
4. Do not interfere in the affairs of others.
5. Accept small irritations with good humor.
6. Do not dwell on the faults of others.
7. Accept censures even if unmerited.
8. Give in to the will of others.
9. Accept insults and injuries.
10. Accept contempt, being forgotten and disregarded.
11. Be courteous and delicate even when provoked by someone.
12. Do not seek to be admired and loved.
13. Do not protect yourself behind your own dignity.
14. Give in, in discussions, even when you are right.
15. Choose always the more difficult task.

"Learn to be humble by doing all the humble work and doing it for Jesus. You cannot learn humility from books; you learn it by accepting humiliations. Humiliations are not meant to torture us; they are gifts from God. These little humiliations—if we accept them with joy—will help us to be holy, to have a meek and humble heart like Jesus."
— St. Teresa of Calcutta

This article has been updated and was originally published in September 2015.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

April 10
Wednesday – Fifth Week of Lent

Amen, amen, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin. Jn 8:34

In our desire to rest in the presence of God, our disordered passions, which lead us to sin, become the first obstacle we must overcome. The desert fathers understood this. Many of these holy men wrote discourses on controlling passions. Passions are neither good nor bad. They are what drives us to accomplish things in our lives. They give us energy and purpose. Passionate people are the movers and shakers of the world. Mother Theresa was an extremely passionate lady who accomplished much good.

The problem with our passions, is that each of them is absolute and infinite. They can be all consuming. They want total control of our lives. Think about how you feel when you are caught up in a passionate sexual desire. It takes over your entire being. The same holds true with every other passion as well.

Each want total control. We can view our lives as a series of clashing and overlapping passions. Left uncontrolled, we become slaves to our passions, pulled one way and then the other by them. Our inner peace is destroyed as is our outer peace as well. Taken to an extreme, if enough members of a society have uncontrolled passions, crime will increase, aggression will increase and become more violent, and untimely there will be a breakdown of that society. St. James speaks of this in his letter to Christian communities; “Where do the wars and where do the conflicts among you come from? Is it not from your passions that make war within your members? (James 4:1)

How do we control our passions? How do we find that inner peace we long for? Since the passions cannot be relied upon to control themselves, some power from outside of them must provide that control. Plato called that power reason and used the analogy of a chariot and horses to explain how it works. If you think of horses pulling a chariot as passions, then reason is the charioteer, controlling and guiding the passions (horses) to pull the chariot (you) where you desire it to go. But our reason will only take us so far. St. James suggests a better way; Wisdom on high or the Wisdom of God. If we rely on God’s wisdom to control our passions then we are assured of success, for “The wisdom from above is first of all pure, then peaceable, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without inconstancy or insincerity. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace for those who cultivate peace.” (James 3:17-18)

Before your contemplative prayer today, pray to the Holy Spirit for wisdom. Consider adding this prayer to your daily prayer routine. If you have not yet received the Sacrament of Reconciliation this Lent, consider going tonight. (The Sacrament of Reconciliation is celebrated in each parish on Wednesdays in Lent). Reflect on the passions that seem to control your life and give them God in the confessional.

**Lenten Action**

If you are a regular practitioner of contemplative prayer, during your dedicated prayer time practice the presence of God as you normally do adding the modifications, if any, you incorporated from the PIPPG suggestions.

If you are new to meditation and contemplative prayer, during your dedicated prayer time practice the presence of God as outlined in Section 1 of the PIPPG booklet.

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40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

April 11th
Thursday- Fifth Week of Lent

If today you hear His voice, harden not your hearts. Ps 95:8

Dorotheos of Gaza, a desert father, wrote an enlightening discourse on conscience that can help us in avoiding sin. He first explains that when God created man, “He breathed into him something divine. A hot bright spark added to reason, which lit up the mind and showed him the difference between right and wrong.” You might think of our conscience as that quiet voice of God that we can use to direct our thoughts and actions. Yet with free will, we can ignore that voice and harden our hearts. When we do this enough, our conscience lays buried under that ever-hardening heart and cannot be heard, or heard so dimly that we can barely make it out.

Dorotheos tells us that we must be “zealous to guard our conscience for as long as we are in this world and not to neglect its promptings in anything. And let us not,” he says, “tread it under foot even in the least thing, for you can see that from the smallest things, which of their nature are worth little, we come to despise the great things. There are no ‘little things’, for when it is a question of bad habits, it is a question of a malignant ulcer.”

On its face, this seems to be a little severe. What harm could there be in giving in to a small ‘sinful’ pleasure? I know from my own experience that Dorotheos is correct. I cannot buy a bag of Oreos, for instance, because I cannot discipline myself to only eat one. I will eventually get to the point of eating the whole bag and going to the store for another. Companies that underwrite insurance policies for industry have also learned this lesson. There are statistics that show that for every 300 near misses, there are 29 minor injuries and one major injury. To drive down injuries the underwriters require documentation of near misses and remedial action at that level. The same rule, then, applies to our spiritual life as well. Commit enough venial sin without an attempt at remediation, and one will soon be committing mortal ones. Our friend, Dorotheos, suggests that we need to satisfy (pay attention to) our conscience toward God, toward our neighbor, and toward material things. Some examples of small things against God might be neglect of prayer or entertainment of evil thoughts. With respect to our neighbors, it means anything that might trouble or harm our neighbor in deed, or work, or gesture, or look. As far as material things go, we must be diligent in using them correctly or over indulging in them (such as food). The goal is not to have our conscience reproach us for anything, but rather to listen to it before we neglect our prayer, lash out at our neighbor, or eat that Oreo. Contemplative prayer and practicing the presence of God can help us with this as by silencing our minds and being aware of the God’s presence we can better hear His voice and harden not our hearts.

**Lenten Action**
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40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

April 12th
Friday- Fifth Week of Lent

*If I do not perform my Father's works, do not believe me; but if I perform them, even if you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may realize and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.* 

Jn 10:38

Jesus’ dispute with the Jewish leaders is quickly coming to a head. They see Him as a threat to their comfortable way of life. A life made possible by an uneasy alliance with Rome and money raised by the temple sacrifice. They are following him around everywhere in Jerusalem, and challenging all that He says. They refuse to see the works Jesus is performing as miracles. To do so would mean that they would have to accept His divinity because only God can suspend the laws of nature. St. Hesychios, one of the desert fathers, said that the intellect is made blind by these three passions: avarice, self-esteem and sensual pleasure. The Pharisees confronting Jesus seemed blinded by at least two of these passions.

We too can be blinded to the works of God that are happening all around us. We hurry through the day forgetting that our lives should be centered on God. We devote little time to God because we get overwhelmed by what Cardinal Robert Sarah calls the “heresy of activism.” Living in this way we lose our sense of God’s Presence in our lives. We are uneasy with silence and we fill every available moment with music, social media, talk radio, television, and other sensory delights. Anything not to think introspectively.

The Church has an antidote to this heresy of activism for over 1700 years ago, the desert fathers and mothers pioneered a certain watchfulness and guarding the heart. Watchfulness has two dimensions: First, we should live our lives such that at any moment we stand ready to give an account of it before God, and Second, we guard the intellect to ensure that we don’t succumb to temptation and sin. St. Hesychios in the Philokalia, states that, “Watchfulness is a spiritual method which, if sedulously practiced over a long period, completely frees us with God's help from impassioned thoughts, impassioned words, and evil actions...Watchfulness is a way embracing every virtue, every commandment. It is the heart's stillness and, when free from mental images, it is the guarding of the intellect. Watchfulness is a continual fixing and halting of thought at the entrance to the heart.” Try to incorporate the concept of watchfulness in your daily practice of the presence of God.

Ezekiel was appointed by God to be a watchman for the House of Israel. Allow your conscience to be watchman over your heart always on guard, always watchful. Paul tells us; Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you (1Cor. 3:16)? If our temples remain pure then we become aware that the Father and the Son do indeed dwell within us, and we become more aware of the continuous miracle of creation in which we live and move and have our being.

**Lenten Action**

If you are a regular practitioner of contemplative prayer, during your dedicated prayer time practice the presence of God as you normally do adding the modifications, if any, you incorporated from the PIPPG suggestions. If you are new to meditation and contemplative prayer, during your dedicated prayer time practice the presence of God as outlined in Section 1 of the PIPPG booklet.

Today should be a Fast day if you are physically able. Everyone should abstain from eating meat and limit the amount of food one eats. Remember not to watch TV, use computers or your phones to access computer games or unnecessary apps. Please avoid using social media.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

April 13<sup>th</sup>
Saturday- Fifth Week of Lent – The Language of Love – Silence!

But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing, nor do you consider that it is better for you that one man should die instead of the people, so that the whole nation may not perish." He did not say this on his own, but since he was high priest for that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not only for the nation, but also to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to kill him. Jn 11:49-53

Finally, there is a Pharisee that speaks truth. No longer are they hiding behind the pretext of Jesus ‘working’ on the Sabbath and making Himself God. No, their true motive is preservation of their land and nation. In speaking, Caiaphas becomes the instrument of God, prophesying that Jesus was indeed going to die for the nation. Jesus and the Father were way ahead of. The will of the Father was for His Son to die, but not for any earthly nation. No, the intent of the Trinity, was to mount a spec op mission on the very strong hold of the true enemy of Israel and all the dispersed people of God. A mission whose objective was to free all of us from the bondage of sin and death that Satan had held us in since the fall. Just as through the disobedience of one man, [Adam], sin and death entered the world, so through the obedience of one man, [Jesus], the many will be made righteous. (Romans 5). This was the mission that Jesus took on. For [Jesus] being found human in form became obedient [to the Father] unto death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:8). His love for the Father was so great that the Father and He were one, as He said over and over in John’s gospel. Obedience for Him, was not something He was forced to do, but one that He greatly desired to do out of love for the Father. Jesus, then, is our model in obedience.

The word obedience comes from the Latin ob "to" + audire "listen, hear. To listen, or to hear. Over and over we hear of Jesus going off to a quiet place to pray. In Jerusalem, He seemed to spend every night on the Mount of Olives (see Luke 21:37). He and the Father were one because he listened in the silence of those nights to the Father.

“Silence is God's first language.” Thomas Keating tells us. It is in solitude that we learn to ‘speak’ that language. Contemplative prayer takes persistence and patience in part because we are learning a new language and because Satan will do anything to undermine our efforts. But silence is not an absence. Cardinal Robert Sarah tells us that “silence is the manifestation of a presence, the most intense of all presences. The real questions in life are poised in silence.” The question of our redemption, the greatest question in life, was answered by Jesus in the silence of Gethsemane. There was no more intense statement of consequence, or one of more love, than this; Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done. (Lk 22:42)

Our goal in contemplative prayer is to rest in the silence of God. To listen to Him as Jesus listened. To desire to do the will of the Father just as Jesus did. To obey not out of ‘having to’ but out of desiring to. Are you willing to learn that language of love? Can you persist in contemplative prayer not just for 40 days but for a lifetime? For what is a lifetime compared to being able to speak in love to the one who loved us first?

**Lenten Action**

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Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

April 14th - Palm Sunday and the beginning of the Lord’s Passion
Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Phil 2:9-11

So, along with Jesus, we enter Passion Week, a week that brings to fruition all of our Lenten observances. Jesus enters Jerusalem at the beginning of our celebration of the liturgy. Riding a colt, Jesus is greeted by the crowds chanting a verse from Psalm 118, which is a verse we also say at every Mass at the end of the Preface during the Sanctus, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord” (Ps 118:26). And so, with this in mind, let us look at how we might practice the Presence of God in our liturgies. The prophet Habakkuk says the Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him (Hab 2:20). Sacred silence, then, is a cardinal law of all liturgical celebrations, and this is why we practice silence, avoiding idle chatter, when we enter church. In *The Power of Silence*, Robert Cardinal Sarah, the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, states “…[T]hat sacred silence offers us a way of leaving the profane world…so as allow God to take hold of us.” Let us then seal on our lips and practice silence upon blessing ourselves when we enter church.

Cardinal Sarah tells us that the “transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ occurs in the utmost sacred silence. We hear the priest pronounce the words of the consecration, but the miracle of transubstantiation comes about imperceptibly, like all the greatest works of God. Silence is the law of the divine plans.” Our liturgies should reflect that divine law. In those moments of silence that our liturgy include are intended to be profound moments of reflection and recollection as a means of focusing our attention on our God. The silence that follows the priest’s intonation of “Let us pray,” has as its purpose to allow us to orient our interior self to God. A similar silence follows the Confiteor, and more profound silences follow the Liturgy of the Word and Communion. “These times allow the soul to breathe”, as Cardinal Sarah states, “During the Consecration and Eucharistic Prayer, while technically not a period of silence, the congregation is praying in silence while the priest vocalizes the prayer.” The techniques we have learned in practicing the Presence of God, can aid us in silencing our interior self and focusing on God during our liturgical silences at Mass. We just have to pay attention to them and use them to energize our worship. Pope Benedict XVI suggested that we need to relearn this silent, inner co-praying with each other and with the angels and saints… and with Christ himself so that we do not lose the real inner event of the liturgy, the departure from human speech into being touched by the eternal.”

As we enter Passion Week, let us bring our practice of the presence of God into our liturgies, focusing our attention on those silences we find in the celebration of the Mass. Go to the services on the Triduum, and pay attention to the silences that happen during this service, which starts Holy Thursday and does not finish until the Easter Vigil Saturday night. Consider keeping silence for the three days of the Triduum, even outside church. Ponder the meaning of our Lord’s sacrifice in the silent depths of our heart. It is an ancient custom of the church to keep a Paschal fast, limiting our intake of food from Holy Thursday to the end of the Easter Vigil. You may consider keeping that fast as well, using your hunger to deepen your desire for the coming of our Lord at Easter.

**Lenten Action**
If you are a regular practitioner of contemplative prayer, during your dedicated prayer time practice the presence of God as you normally do adding the modifications, if any, you incorporated from the PIPPG suggestions. If you are new to meditation and contemplative prayer, during your dedicated prayer time practice the presence of God as outlined in Section 1 of the PIPPG booklet.

Today is not a Fast day or a day to abstain from anything including TV, computer games, social media or other forms of electronic media on your phones and I pads. Have fun playing in the electronic world if you like, but try to find God in all you do.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

April 15th - Monday of Holy Week

Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my Spirit; he shall bring forth justice to the nations, Not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard in the street. Is 42:1-2

We have been reflecting on John’s gospel during the weekday Masses the last couple of weeks. John’s gospel is different in character from the synoptic gospels as it is highly symbolic, making it rich food for meditation. Today’s gospel tells the story of the anointing of Jesus by Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Judas grumbling about the cost of the perfumed oil. In answering Judas, Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Let her keep this for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." (Jn12:7-8). While the cost of the oil was extravagant, (about one year’s salary for a worker), it is sadly ironic to think that Judas betrayed Jesus for far less.

Spend some time today slowly reading the passage, then if you are able take a walk, reflecting on what you have read. Place yourself in the scene with each character in turn. Notice the emotions that you feel with each. Make note of those things that make you uneasy and try to discern what make them so. A scripture passage that makes us uncomfortable often indicates a need in us to reconcile a truth about ourselves that we may not fully understand or not think about. Pray for understanding and humility.

As you continue your Lenten journey through Holy Week, enter with Jesus into His silence. The gospels this week are all about his ever-growing separation. Separation from His followers, friends, His Mother, and ultimately His Father. He is on a journey to “bring forth justice to the nations, not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard in the street.” (Is 42:1-2). As his silence deepens, let yours deepen as well. The silence of the Garden; Father if you are willing, take this cup from me; still, not my will but yours be done.” (Lk 22: 42). The silence of Jesus before the Sanhedrin, before Herod, before Pilate. Not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard. The silence from the cross, the pulpit from which He gave is greatest sermon. A sermon of silence broken only by seven words, but words spoken out of the profound silence of His heart. The silence of the grave where, He descends to a place where God is not. A place where in his humanity, He can no longer hear that silent voice of His Father but is bound to Him with cords of love. And in that silence, He searches for Adam, for all of us. His lost sheep. Gathering all and leading us back to that garden we lost so long ago. This week, let all mortal flesh keep silent.

Lenten Action

If you are a regular practitioner of contemplative prayer, during your dedicated prayer time practice the presence of God as you normally do adding the modifications, if any, you incorporated from the PIPPG suggestions.

If you are new to meditation and contemplative prayer, during your dedicated prayer time practice the presence of God as outlined in Section 1 of the PIPPG booklet.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

April 16th - Tuesday of Holy Week - There is a crack in everything that’s how the light gets in!

“All the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in.”

In today’s Gospel reading from John we are at the last supper. Judas is revealed as the betrayer and when he takes the morsel from Jesus’ own hands, Satan enters him and he goes off to betray Jesus. Jesus then says, “Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and he will glorify him at once.” What is Jesus saying here? Firstly, the world and all the people in it are broken vessels. They are tainted in some mysterious way by Original Sin, and that sin impacts and affects everything that happens. Glory is found only in God. But all is not lost because it is in the cracks that sin manifests in us and around us where the grace gets in. Grace abounds more where sin abounds. Each of us are cracked vessels; cracked in ways we know and in ways we don’t realize. But it is through the cracks in everything that the light of God’s grace comes. The joy that Lenard Cohen oddly expresses about how we should ring the bells and not worry about perfect offerings is counseling us to focus not on the cracks, but on the light; not to dwell on what’s wrong, but what right God wants of us to do out of the crack that is our brokenness and sin.

Shadowboxing is an aspect of the spiritual life that we don’t talk too much about. When God made each of us, He gave us a certain set of talents and faults, strengths and weaknesses, and He even gave us blind spots. While we don’t like our faults and sins, and in many ways, we are not aware of our blind spots, God has given them to us for our sanctification. If you will, our faults, weaknesses, and sins are a sort of calling card to come to Jesus. As we become aware of our faults and sins we dive down deep to find the root causes of these calling cards, and we can come to know ourselves more fully held in grace as we confront them and move closer to God. Today do a little shadowboxing. Take a look at those cracks that festoon your life. Not just your sins, but your weaknesses and faults. Are there light sides and dark sides to these things in your life? Easter Morning is coming in a few short days, and like Mary Magellan, who once had 7 demons possessing her, Jesus still met her at the tomb. He will meet you there too. Will you be ready?

Lenten Action

If you are a regular practitioner of contemplative prayer, spend a few minutes before you begin your contemplative time in prayer imagining that you are at the tomb and the Risen Jesus is before you. What does He say to you? Then enter normal time in contemplative prayer. For those newer to contemplation, meditate on the Risen Jesus before you at the tomb, and let the joy that brings suffuse your contemplative prayer time. For your time in contemplative prayer, use the Jesus prayer as your focus to quiet your mind.

Today is not a Fast day, but if you have a mind to abstain from a favorite food or drink, please do so as a means of strengthening your will power. Remember not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.”

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40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

April 17th - Wednesday of Holy Week

Today’s Gospel reading from Matthew speaks to the betrayal of Judas, as John’s did yesterday. Judas, like all the other apostles, is at the table when Jesus breaks the bread and offers the cup as He institutes the Holy Eucharist. Judas receives the Body and Blood of Jesus like every other apostle. Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich, who had over a long number of years visions of Jesus where He dictated to her His life, says of the moment that Judas received the Body and Blood of Christ, that he immediately left the upper room and did so without a prayer or thanksgiving. She goes onto say that during the whole meal, she saw a little red demon sitting at Juda’s feet. This demon rose up often to touch Judas’ heart. When Judas left and got outside the door, she saw three devils pressing around him, one entering his mouth, one urging him on, and one running in front of him lighting the way in the near pitch blackness of night as they impossibly hurried him along before he could reconsider what he was doing as they rushed him to make his deal for his thirty pieces of silver. As Paul notes in Colossians 1:16-17, our battle is a spiritual one against both visible and invisible foes, whether they be thrones, dominions, principalities, or powers. While it is important to know what we are facing, it is more important to rest in God. This is what contemplative prayer and the practice of the Presence of God is all about - letting God imprint your mind, heart, and soul with His Divine Presence, rather than letting the demons imprint their spirit of evil in you.

“Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you” James 4:8. As Jesus tells our two visionaries from England in God Calling, “…this is the law of the spiritual life. You must turn to Me before you are conscious of My nearness. It is in that turning to Me that you cultivate in every circumstance holiness, whether a glad turning of thankfulness or a turning of weak appeal.” The practice of the Presence of God is just such a recognition of the Divine Presence that is ever with you and brings confidence, comfort, joy, and a sweetness into life. Judas unfortunately never gets it because he is focused on money and what he wants. He receives the Body and Blood of Jesus at his first communion unworthily, and he eats only his condemnation. Contemplation transfigures the soul, and by extension, the mind and heart in a mysterious grace-filled way. God’s graces strip our mind and heart of any attachment that is not of God. This stripping process must begin here on earth in order to make our own paschal journey to the next an easier process. Today give some thought about the sorts of temporal concerns that are distracting you from God. Place them at the foot of the cross, surrendering them to Jesus. If there are issues from them that you think will remain to vex you, ponder them in your heart, turning them over and looking at them from the perspective of what you think Lord is trying to teach you from the thorns that remain in your side?

**Lenten Action**

If you are a regular practitioner of contemplative prayer, spend a few minutes before you begin your contemplative time in prayer pondering in your heart what is keeping you from a fuller union with Jesus. Surrender those things as you enter your normal time in contemplative prayer.

If you are new to meditation and contemplative prayer, in your quiet place ponder in your heart what is keeping you from a fuller union with Jesus and say a prayer surrendering these things to God. God to you quiet place and pray the Jesus prayer focusing your attention being with God.

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40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

April 18th – Holy Thursday

Today begins the Church’s celebration of the Sacred Triduum where we solemnly contemplate the greatest mysteries of our redemption. The Easter Tridium’s liturgy is a three-day act of worship that gives each of us an opportunity to gather in the upper room with Jesus and the disciples, and then to have a share in Jesus’ passion and death by walking, albeit mystically, with them through the events of Jesus’ agony and arrest, His trial before the Sanhedrin, His time of questioning and ridicule before both Pilot and Herod, His scourging, His crowning with thorns, His carrying of the cross, His mounting the cross, and finally His Resurrection. As Jesus dies, we stand at the foot of the cross with Mary and John. And as Jesus resurrects, we stand at the tomb, with Mary Magdalene, and cry in joy, “Rabouni!” Today in all the Catholic churches around the world our celebration of the Paschal Mystery begins.

Over the last several weeks we have explored Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection’s understanding of the practice of the Presence of God. One of the more mysterious and captivating things Jesus does at the Last Supper is to wash the feet of the apostles. The apostle John’s version of this telling event is attached with this reflection (Jn 13:1-20). We encourage you to pray today with this passage, and to imagine Jesus is before you and is washing your feet, telling you, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If then your Lord and Teacher, has washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Truly, Truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.” What is Jesus telling you as He says this to you? What is He calling you to do with His example of washing your feet?

Prayer is an opening of the door of one’s heart that welcomes God. God is washing our feet constantly, but neither you nor I notice it. God is always with us, ever at our feet rubbing in His cleansing grace. The practice of the Presence of God gives us a way of receiving God’s rubbed in grace that actualizes in our life as unrestrained joy. As Brother Lawrence says in his first letter to a Nun, where he shares under the guise of pretending it is another friar’s experience when it is likely actually his own, “You will see that his principal concern throughout the more than 40 years he has been in religious life has been always to be with God...He has no other interest than the pure love of God...[because he has done this] He is not so accustomed to [God’s] divine presence that he receives constant help in every situation. His soul has been enjoying continual inner consolations for about 30 years. Sometimes they are so intense he is forced to do childish things in order to control them and keep them from showing outwardly. This behavior makes him look more foolish than holy.” Let us all come to a place where we look, as Brother Lawrence did, more foolish than holy because we are so filled with God that we have to struggle to keep it from bubbling out.

**Lenten Action**

If you are a regular practitioner of contemplative prayer, read the attached reading of the Gospel of John prayerfully. What is Jesus telling you by the act of washing your feet. Then go into your normal contemplative prayer practice. If you are new to meditation and contemplative prayer do the same, and then sit quietly while Jesus washes your feet. Use the Jesus prayer to silence your mind.

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Gospel of John (chapter 13: 1 to 20)

Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. And during supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son to betray him, Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, and Peter said to him, “Lord, do you wash my feet?” Jesus answered him, “What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand.” Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.” And Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no part in me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” Jesus said to him, “He who is bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but he is clean all over, and you are clean, but not all of you.” For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, “You are not all clean.”

When he had washed their feet, and taken his garments, and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If then your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Truly, Truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. I am not speaking of you all; I know whom I have chosen; it is that the Scripture may be fulfilled, ‘He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.’ I tell you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he. Truly, Truly, I say to you, he who receives any one whom I send receives me; and he who receives me receives him who sent me.”
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

April 19th – Good Friday

“And they crucified him” (Mark 15:24).

A few years ago, my spiritual director, a Benedictine Abbot, was named the Titular Abbot of Tewksbury Cathedral/Abbey in England. Tewksbury Cathedral is an Anglican Cathedral now, having been annexed by Henry VIII into what would become the Anglican Church of England. Being named Titular Abbot was a great honor for my spiritual director, and along with it he got to travel to England to be received with much honor and not a small measure of joy at what once was a thriving Benedictine Abbey. While he was there, he attended daily morning Mass in a church that had a large wooden crucifix complete with Jesus’ corpus that was in the back of the church. Over the course of several days as he was leaving after the Mass, he had to pass by this large Cross on which Jesus hung with his arms outstretched. For several mornings in a row, he had to pass by a man who was standing before the Cross with his arms outstretched looking up at the crucified face of Jesus. The man would keep his arms outstretched for as long as he could, but eventually they would fall at his side from exhaustion. He would rest a moment and then raise his arms up and stretch them out again keeping his arms as straight as possible until exhaustion again set in. On one particular morning, Father Abbot watched the man raise and stretch out his arms and struggle to keep them raised. Repeatedly, the man would raise his arms, the exhaustion would come and his arms would fall, only to be raised and outstretched again. The man’s efforts made him sweat profusely. Finally one morning Father Abbot got his courage up, and during one of the man’s pauses, he asked the man what he was doing. The man told him that the British Army had sent both his sons to Iraq, and that one after the other, they had died in combat. He said he was very mad at his government for sending both his sons over to Iraq, but he hated the people who murdered his sons. As tears welled in his eyes, he explained that after a morning Mass several weeks before, it came to him that God the Father had, just like him, watched his only begotten Son be murdered on the Cross. And in a mystical way God the Father’s arms were outstretched along with His Son’s on the cross, but in losing His Son God’s only response has been love. And so, the man explained, he determined to stand in front of the Cross with his arms outstretched in imitation of Jesus’ position on the cross, and he resolved to do this until God the Father took away the hatred he felt in his heart and replaced it with love.

On this day, over 2000 years ago, Jesus was nailed with his arms outstretched to the cross. We believe in One God, as we intone in our Creed every Sunday. And our One God is a God of Three Divine Persons. So, in a mystical way when we nailed Jesus to the Cross, we also nailed God the Father and the Holy Spirit to the Cross with Him. Today find a crucifix and stand in front of it with outstretched arms. Keep them stretched out until they fall at your side in exhaustion. Do this until sweat breaks out on your brow. In this you will feel a small measure of what Jesus must have felt, nailed to the Cross. As you stretch your arms out, lift up your greatest sin and give it to God as you experience a small measure of the suffering Jesus must have endured on the Cross. Ask God to take away whatever sin you offer up.

**Lenten Action**

If you are a regular practitioner of contemplative prayer, enter into your normal contemplative prayer practice focusing on the love of God for you borne out by the fact of His willingness to die for you. If you are new to meditation and contemplative prayer do the same.

Today is a Fast day if you are physically able. Everyone should abstain from eating meat and limit the amount of food one eats. Remember not to watch TV, use computers or your phones to access computer games or unnecessary apps. Please avoid using social media.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

April 20th – Holy Saturday

All around the Catholic world there is no sacrifice of the Mass. On Holy Saturday the Church waits at the Lord’s tomb in prayer and fasting, meditating on His Passion and Death and on His Descent into Hell. Yes, you heard that right, decent into Hell. These are the words we hear in the Apostle’s Creed. … “He descended into hell.” Catholic traditions going back to the apostles and our early church fathers believe that one of the places Jesus goes first after He dies is down into hell. This comes from Jewish belief that while the people of Israel awaited the coming of the Messiah, those who died were taken to a place called Sheol, which was a sort of holding place those who had died awaited the coming of the Messiah. The Greeks called it the underworld, which was ruled by Hades, the Greek god of the land of the dead. Hades name became synonymous with the underworld, which he ruled and it is the origin of our word “Hell.” The reference to Hell was loosely applied to and became in some ways synonymous with the Jewish understanding of Sheol, the realm of the dead. Over different cultures there developed an understanding that whatever energy enlivened the human body, when it passed from it in death did not pass on into oblivion, but went a place where all the dead went. For the Greeks that was Hades or the underworld. For the Jews it was Sheol. Unlike the Greeks who saw the underworld as an ongoing bleak place that was dark and dreary where none of the pleasures of life were available any longer. The Jews believed it to be more of a place of waiting where those who died were held awaiting the coming of the Messiah. Adam and Eve, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Israel, Moses and all the prophets, in fact everyone who had died passed into Sheol. Science has in a way verified this belief with its understanding that energy can neither be created nor destroyed. So, the life force or energy that the soul is, in some mysterious way passes over into the spiritual world, and as we believe what is essentially us as a person lives on spiritually in God or lives on without God due to our actions.

Holy tradition passed down to us from the apostles and early church fathers holds that one of the first things that Jesus did after He died was to descend into Sheol. Today, over all the earth there is a great silence and stillness as we wait outside the tomb. And, as we wait, Jesus who has died on the Cross, enters Sheol to bring out Adam and Eve and all those who have died and lived according to God’s law into His Heavenly abode. Today especially is a day to pray for those who have died. Attached to this reflection is bit about the Communion of Saints and our responsibility in Christian Charity to pray for those who have died. Please incorporate praying for the dead in your daily prayers.

In your meditative and contemplative praying today imagine the joy those who were waiting in Sheol must have felt to see Jesus the Messiah come for them. He is after all coming for you too, and tomorrow is a small celebration of what you will feel when He does.

Lenten Action

If you are a regular practitioner of contemplative prayer, spend some time remembering those who have died that you have known, ask God to bring them into heaven today, and then enter your normal contemplative prayer practice. If you are new to meditation and contemplative prayer do the same. Use the Jesus prayer to silence your mind. Failing silence there, which is not a defeat, meditate envisioning yourself in Sheol waiting for your savior, and then He comes. We counsel this because Satan will be particularly active today and you will not want to pray this way or to sit quietly with Jesus. Today is not a Fast day, but as we all wait in silence at the entrance of the Jesus tomb we encourage you to spend as much time as you can in prayer, and not to watch TV, or use your computer or your phone to access social media, computer games, or other unnecessary apps.”
The Communion of Saints
Catholic belief about the makeup of the communion of saints is that there are three states to the Church: The Church Triumphant, composed of all the good angels and those who have died and lived saintly lives according to the judgment and mercy of God; The Church Militant, composed of those who are currently living here on earth; and The Church Suffering in Purgatory, composed of all who have died and are in need of some form of purification before coming into the beatific vision with God for all eternity in heaven. All three states of the Church are in communion with each of the other states.

You might be wondering where is the contemplative part of all this and you would be right in wondering, but here it is. Each state of the Church is called under the two greatest commandments; love of God and love of neighbor to work for the sanctification of those in the other states. So those in the Church Triumphant who are in heaven pray for and watch over us here on earth according to God’s Holy Will.

We in the Church Militant can ask for their help and we get it according to God’s Holy Will. This form of prayer is known as intercessory prayer. And our praying is not worship of a given saint that is being invoked, but rather a request for assistance before the Throne of God. Our job, while here on earth in the Church Militant is to do the things we are called by God to do to help us in our process of sanctification. But we are also called to assist our neighbors with their sanctification. So, we have something to do about us in the Church Militant. However, we also are called in Christian charity to pray for and make sacrifices for all the suffering souls in Purgatory to help them with their purification. They can do nothing for themselves and there are a lot of souls who have no one to pray and make sacrifices for them. While the Suffering Souls in Purgatory are focused on their own purification, they know when someone is praying for them and when they arrive in the heavenly court and truly enter the beatific vision, they immediately begin praying for anyone who has helped them during their purification process. Those whom you pray for and fast for who have come to heaven from Purgatory in part because of your contribution to their sanctified state, pray for you and intercede for you while you remain here on earth, and they will greet you upon your entry into heaven.

Our Blessed Mother speaking to the visionaries at Medjugorie spoke about the importance of prayer for not only the living but for the souls in Purgatory. For the living she said: “It is important to pray for others, because when you pray for someone, an angel goes and sits on the shoulder of the person [you are praying for].” For the Suffering Souls in Purgatory our Church, and our Blessed Mother has verified this to various visionaries over recent years, when you go to Mass and are in a state of grace and you receive Holy Communion and you pray a rosary or read sacred scripture for a half hour, offering your time at Mass, your reception of Holy Communion, and your prayers of the rosary or your reading of Sacred Scripture up to Mary with the expressed purpose of praying for a soul in Purgatory, you receive as a grace the gift of a plenary indulgence out of the Mercy of God. When one receives a plenary indulgence your soul is restored to its pristine baptismal form and sanctity, which means that if you die without having sinned before you died, you would avoid the purification process and be taken immediately to heaven. Mary told the visionaries at Medjugorie that when you give a plenary indulgence to her for a soul in Purgatory they are immediately restored to their baptismal pristine form and sanctity, and they are taken to heaven. If you go to daily Mass, you have a way of helping a soul out of Purgatory each day. It is a great mystery as to why God has included us and wants us to participate in His work of salvation, but He has. Mary also told the visionaries at Medjugorie that when you gift your plenary indulgence over for a soul in Purgatory, she will through God’s Mercy magnify it so that not only that soul receives it, but you receive a plenary indulgence. Enter earnestly into the work of God’s salvation and start praying for the Suffering Souls in Purgatory. They are waiting at the tomb just as we are and they need our assistance to roll back the stone and enter into the heavenly abode.
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

April 21st – Easter Sunday
Ring the bells that still can ring! Forget your perfect offering! There is a crack in everything, for that's how the light gets in. The sealed tomb is now cracked open and the light of Jesus’ Resurrection has dawned.

“But Mary stayed outside the tomb weeping. And as she wept, she bent over into the tomb and saw two angels in white sitting there, one at the head and one at the feet where the body of Jesus had been. And they said to her ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken my Lord, and I don’t know where they laid him.’ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus there, but did not know it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?’ She thought it was the gardener and said to him, ‘Sir, if you carried him away tell me where you laid him, and I will take him.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said in Hebrew, ‘Rabouni!’” (Jn 20:11-16)

A few years back, a homily was given on the joy that Mary Magdalene must have felt when she was at the empty tomb weeping and then had an encounter with the Risen Lord. The homilist had struggled throughout several weeks on what could be said to those who would be in the church on Easter morning that would convey the joy the Magdalene must have felt on seeing Jesus on that momentous morning. Our homilist friend thought that her joy should be our joy, but he had written 4 different homilies and was not satisfied with the joy in any of them. On Good Friday coming out of the service, a parishioner shared a story of what had happened the last time he was at adoration and had taken his very young grandson. He said that night, his grandson imitated many of the things he did like kneeling with his hands folded and sitting attentively looking at Jesus in the monstrance on the altar, but he was a typical boy and none of this happened for long. He said that as he closed adoration, his grandson listened to his grandad sing the closing hymn and as they were getting ready to leave, his grandson pulled on his jacket and asked if he could sing to Jesus. Grandad said yes, not knowing what would come next. And of a sudden, his grandson broke out singing “Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay!” In the movie the song is from, it revels in God’s creation, with lots of sunshine and bluebirds tweeting; sitting on your shoulder. This song, sung in joy by this little boy must have pleased Jesus very much. Of course, it is not particularly liturgical, but that joy is catching and the little boy’s song to Jesus captivated our lost homilist, who then incorporated the story into the Easter morning homily, along with the song, which he sang to start the homily. At first there were a lot of confused faces, but when he explained why he was singing it there was a certain measure of that innocent joy that blossomed in our little friend’s heart that came into all the hearts in the church. Like Mary Magdalene standing at the tomb weeping, we have stood over these last 40 days preparing for this moment. Our hearts should be bubbling with joy and there is not much better a song to start the bells ringing and the birds singing then Zip-a-dee-doo-dah! (Zip-a-dee-doo-dah is Disney song from the movie “Song of the South.” The lyrics are attached for easy reference, but if you have a mind you can Google Zip-a-dee-doo-dah and hear a rendition of this song over the Internet. It is worth it for the joy!)

**Lenten Action**

There is no Lenten action! Today, our Living God stands before us Resurrected! The Church today rests before Christ, who comes before us as he does with the Apostle Thomas and says, put your hand in the wounds in my hands and touch the wound in my side. Zip-a-dee-doo-dah! Our Lord Lives!
Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay
My, oh, my, what a wonderful day
Plenty of sunshine headin' my way
Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay!

Mister Bluebird's on my shoulder
It's the truth, it's "actcha'll"
Everything is "satisfactcha'll"

Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay
Wonderful feeling, wonderful day!

Song of the South 1946
40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge

April 22
Monday – The Day after Easter

Congratulations! You did it! You completed the challenge!

Did you wish for more – some dramatic occurrence, a peak experience, something memorable? Maybe this happened for you and maybe it didn’t. Maybe you learned to meet what you are given with a humble heart? You may have noticed how we seek perfection in everything we do. How we want more from our lives; how we set lofty goals and strive to obtain them. How we push so hard for an imagined future that we are never quite satisfied with what we have now. And how with all that pushing, we forget to notice the ripples in the rain puddle, the warm breeze pressing against our face, the delicate blossoms on the tree overhead. That we live our lives in a thin little sliver, sandwiched between vast eternities of past and future. And when it comes right down to it, that’s enough; that little sliver is the key. It’s enough to turn our face to the warmth of the morning sun, to hold the hand of a friend, to nuzzle our cheek against a soft pillow? Do we really need more?

If over the past 40 days you learned to notice God in the thin sliver, to see the eternal life in God’s present moment and accept it as His will, then you have indeed learned a great deal. You may also have realized your experience depends on what you focus on. That you can go from happy to sad quicker than the time it takes to breathe a single breath. That your mood follows your thoughts and your thoughts come and go; that you have been looking all your life for constancy in an ever-changing world where the only constancy is God. Or that to quiet your incessant striving for more and different, to fill the empty place inside yourself that always seems to nag “not quite enough”, to still your proliferating thoughts of dissatisfaction, you simply need to pray. And this prayer can consist of nothing more than a simple awareness and general loving attentiveness of God’s internal presence, right here and right now. And that it is indeed possible to pray without ceasing. If you realized, or even glimpsed, any of this then yes, you have truly learned a great deal.

Now you can choose whether or not to continue this contemplative practice. Forty days is almost long enough to establish a habit, and you are on the cusp of forming a habit of prayer. Dozens of reasons will surface as to why you can’t continue. Please consider carefully as to what is the most important thing. If like Mary you choose wisely, be warned Martha will have something to say about it. We pray you will choose wisely… Stand strong. Do it for the Love of Christ.

If you choose to continue your practice, you won’t be alone. The SJV Spiritual Growth Group will be there to help and you are always welcome to join us on Tuesdays at 7:30PM in the Family Life Center. Beyond that, we have many ideas to provide you support. We plan to periodically facilitate free 1/2 day contemplative retreats on the SJV campus, the first of which will be this June. These retreats will allow us to pray together, share our experiences, ask questions, and learn about contemplatives and contemplative topics. We are also considering a monthly Contemplative Outlook bulletin that will provide reflections similar to those of the Desert40 challenge, keep you informed of contemplative activities in the area, and share articles, videos and other helpful information. If you would like to start your own small contemplative prayer group, we can provide assistance or steer you toward any facilitator training as you like. To keep you informed, we’ll use the Desert40 mailing list now and again to keep you informed of Contemplative prayer happenings at our church. If now or at any time you would like to be removed from the mailing list, just send an email requesting such to Desert40@Comcast.Net. If you liked the 40 Day Contemplative Lenten Challenge, let Father know, for who knows, in his kindness he may let us do it again. And thank God for a great Lent. May you always be in the Peace, Love and Joy of Christ.