

Pause II

We have begun to contemplate the life of Jesus. We have seen how, from the very beginning, his life was shaped by profound trust in God, surrender to God's plan, and the acceptance of poverty and rejection. We have been praying to know, love, and be with him more deeply. Before we move on to contemplate his active ministry, we will take a few weeks to prepare for how this retreat will shape our lives and the choices we will make as we draw more closely to Jesus.

It is desire that leads to choice. To understand the choices we make, and to prepare to make new ones, we must understand our desires and prepare to reform them.

Throughout these weeks, in all the in-between times, especially in the busiest and most pressured moments, we will try to understand the way of desiring that places us with Jesus. And to freely respond to Jesus' way, we will try to understand the very opposite way of desiring, a way that surrounds us in our culture today.

The clearest message from our society today, and the values that shape the advertising that tries to seduce us, is that we will be happier if we have more. It's subtle but consistent. If some is good, then more is better. It seems so natural to work hard to earn more so that I can have more. We acquire and consume and become addicted to some bad things, but normally we just adopt a lifestyle that fits what we can afford. And it's not just things that we accumulate. We experience a desire to gather accomplishments or attractive relationships — other indications of our success. What is closely associated with this movement is the inevitable connection between what we possess and our identity. It's tempting to think that we are more, because we have more. We judge one another by these measures of success. And while there is nothing inherently bad about having things or achievements, or with the recognition and adulation that goes with them, they can seductively lead to pride, arrogance, and independence from God. Riches, leading to honors. Honors, leading to pride. This is a pattern of desiring we want to understand insofar as it is at work in us.

We've already seen that the way Jesus desires is quite different. His way of making choices is formed by a pattern of desiring that we've already been attracted to and that we want to understand more deeply this week. Jesus attracts us to the fundamental desire of trusting in God. When we place our lives in God's hands, as Jesus did, we experience the vulnerability of that surrender. When all is gift, we can no longer measure ourselves by what we've accumulated. This poverty of spirit, and the freedom that comes with it, often feels wonderful. Jesus, however, wants us to understand that it is quite countercultural. If riches lead to honors, poverty of any kind inevitably leads to dishonor. Much of our society doesn't respect simple trust in God. From the desire for spiritual poverty comes the free openness to actual poverty, if it should come to us. The less we desire to acquire, the less we will be well regarded by others. Therefore, the desire to trust in God alone leads to the incredible desire for the dishonor, humiliation, and contempt that will place me with Jesus. For, ultimately, this is the path to humility and humble readiness for any service with him. Spiritual poverty leading to humiliation. Humiliation leading to humility. In these weeks we want to understand this way of desiring.

Pray in these or similar words...

Dear Mary,

I haven't spent a lot of time talking with you since I was a child. Now, doing this retreat, I want to move closer to your son, and I find myself wanting to get to know you. In the past weeks as I've been praying, I have been picturing your life and the way you lived it with Joseph and Jesus. I see the way you taught Jesus, and as I watch you struggle with being a parent and dealing with married life, I find myself able to connect with you more.

I want so deeply to receive the grace and courage to live my life the way Jesus did. Please ask Jesus to accept me in my struggle to serve him. I can see the many ways I cling to my pride, arrogance, and independence from God. I always think of independence as a very good thing, and yet when I try to be independent from God, it's really my way of trying to be God. Go to your son, please, Mary. Ask Jesus to help me to accept my limitations, to embrace them as sources of grace in my life. My struggle for perfection won't bring me closer to God, but my struggle to accept my flaws might.

Hail Mary, full of grace . . .

Oh, Jesus,

I turn to you in such humility. I am so drawn to the kind of life you led on earth, but it seems impossible for me! I am so caught up in the subtlest kind of struggle: a few honors or awards here or there are nice, but they're never enough. I want more honors, more recognition. I have restructured my life to fit the opinion of the world, and slowly I have drifted away from the kind of life I want to lead.

I ask myself, What can it hurt? At first it's just some applause, some people telling me how wonderful I am. But then I read the retreat guide for these weeks and I know what is wrong — how subtly the world has changed my viewpoint. Suddenly I am the honors and awards, and if they stop, what will become of me? I have lost myself in this career climbing, out of balance life. It's not that my job is bad or even that the honors are harmful; it's that I have lost my perspective.

Dear Jesus, ask God to help me to resist the things in this world that keep me from the humility and poverty of a life like yours.

Jesus, may all that is in you flow into me . . .

Loving God,

You put your son on this earth to become one of us — for us. Help me to watch how he lived and pattern my life after his. I know that with my arrogance and independence I want to do this myself, but now, at least for today, at this moment, I know I can't. Please, God, give me the grace to imitate Jesus in all things, even those that frighten me. I'm not even looking at the dramatic things like torture and crucifixion, but at the way he simply put the needs of other people ahead of his own. Dear God, I want to live like that but I am sometimes so far away from it.

Be with me in my struggle. Let me only seek your approval for my life. Let me become aware of the quiet ways in which I am seduced away from following your son to becoming a slave to the world.

Our Father, who art in heaven . . .