

Readings: [First Sunday of Advent | USCCB](#)

Day 1. The room was dark. There seemed to be a spotlight revealing a white door, but other than that, I could see nothing else, no walls, no furniture, nothing.

A few years ago, I attended an 8-day silent Ignatian retreat. If you are not familiar with Ignatian spirituality, each day is spent in full silence and there are four different hours of prayer you have to do each day. For each hour, you are given a specific grace to pray for and then a scripture passage to read. Then you are to allow the Spirit to guide your imagination in prayer as you place yourself in that scene, and then write what happened.

Since we are the beginning of advent, I'd like to take our next four Sundays together as little retreat experience, sharing with you some journal entries and reflections that emerged out of that experience with the hopes the testimony might resonate with you as they deal with some of the themes being given to us for our readings this advent.

So, Welcome to the beginning.

Day 1, June 3, 2016, 8:30pm.

Grace to pray for: to be generous with God.

Location: dorm room, sitting on a chair in front of a small table, bible, icon of Jesus, and lit tea light.

Preliminary thoughts: I have been in seminary now for four years.

How I have longed to be here, but now I feel God very distant; prayer is

difficult and exhausting, dry, God seems too complicated to comprehend, too distant, not personal at all... so I am here at this retreat as a last resort, giving God a last chance to do something with me, or else I will step away from seminary.

I have been given the gospel of John chapter 20 verses 19-29, that familiar scene when after the death of Jesus, the disciples are hiding behind a locked door in the upper room for fear of the Jews after witnessing what they did to their teacher. Jesus suddenly becomes present to them in the room showing them his wounds and Thomas then asks for proof. I am not sure how this whole imaginative prayer works, or if it even works, but I'll give it a try.

Journal entry after prayer:

I read the passage a few times, then closed my eyes asking the Holy Spirit to guide my imagination. To my surprise, it didn't take long for me to imagine that I was in a room.

The room was dark. There was a white door visible that seemed to be illuminated by an invisible spotlight, but other than that, I could see nothing else, no walls, no furniture... I looked around expecting to see the disciples but nothing. I figured this room represented my heart, so I prayed:

Lord, how often is the door of my heart locked like the disciples who were afraid? If this is what this room is, then what are my fears? What is it that keeps me from unlocking the door of my heart to let you or others to enter?

After a few seconds, words of my insecurities came to mind: wanting to be liked, fearing disappointment, not wanting to disappoint

others, the fear of having to be someone I am not, the thought that being a Christian and living up to the call was too much... I then felt an urge to want Jesus in the room with me. I approached the door to unlock it and let him in. I put my hand on the door handle, but hesitated, I could not get my self to move my wrist.

Jesus, you came into their midst despite the door being locked... apparently you can walk through walls, that's cool. Well, I don't know if I am ready to open the door at this time, so I ask you to do the same for me, come into the room despite the door being locked.

I then heard an internal voice respond to me:

*You must make me your **priority**. I know there are many things going on in your day, from class to work to friends to hobbies, but you have stopped seeking me, I've become one more annoying task. If you seek me first, then you would realize that I am already with you, right here. I am not here to compete for your time with everything else you need to do.*

I realized that part of my struggle in prayer was the fear that God would ask me more than I was willing to do, give up, or take on since I was already feeling overwhelmed. The thought of having to dedicate time to prayer aside from going to mass seemed exhausting, burdensome. I wanted another a-ha moment, divine intervention.

I need to see you, Lord. I need another experience like the one you gave me on Holy Thursday when I believed. I need you to shake my world again so I can be reinvigorated in my faith. I really get Thomas, he simply wanted to have a living experience of you, to touch you... is that bad? I mean yes, I get it, you prefer that we trust you without

necessarily having to see... but you know what, sometimes seeing helps... so yes, I am demanding it! I don't want to hear you, I want to see you, do something.

I felt myself get frustrated. Jesus responded:

So, you want to see me? Then give me the time then that I deserve.

This response annoyed me. I felt offended. I replied:

What are you talking about? I am in seminary am I not? I gave up a career, the prospect of a family for you... how am I not giving you time? What more do you want from me?

Then I said something that surprised me:

Why are you asking of me more than I can give you?

There was no response, just silence. By this time, I feel exhausted, so after hearing nothing else, I decide to end the prayer.

I feel really frustrated because I realize Jesus got me to admit something I was denying... he was right, I had become mediocre in my prayer life. The grace was to be generous with God, and I through I was, but in reality, if I am honest, then yes, I am doing the bare minimum, just enough to make me feel like I am a Christian, but really, my priority is not at all him. I end this journal entry and hour of prayer with hope that something will happen this week.

*Lord, give me the desire to desire you. Give me the desire to make you a **priority**.*

10pm, end of day 1.

Making God a priority. How we know the importance and struggle of making God a priority. What does it take to make God a priority? What motivates us to do so?

Scripture today offers us yet again apocalyptic readings which point to the urgency of making God a priority because the old world has ended, and the new Christian age has come with the first coming of Christ. The urgency lies not in the fear of tribulation, but in the hope of what it means: that the Son of Man is here, present in our midst, and will return again in glory to bring everything into completion.

St. Paul says that this is where Christian hope lies, in the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and thus, this is the hope that should **shape our priorities** and take seriously what it means to claim this promise.

As we enter our reflective season of advent, I offer you a few simple questions: what priority does your faith have in your life right now? Does prayer seem like a burden? In what other ways do you nourish your relationship with God other than coming to mass on Sunday?

Advent is an opportunity to refocus, recommit. I would suggest, if you are not already doing so, making Sunday mass part of your whole week process. Start by reading the upcoming Sunday readings on Thursday or Friday, that way you will be better prepared, disposed, and attentive and you would have given the Word time to become part of your week.

When Sunday arrives, make it as a goal to walk away with one thing: a word, a phrase, a prayer, a challenge, something that speaks to

you. Then, on Tuesday or Wednesday, go back to the readings, maybe listen to the homily again, so as to let message becomes better engraved in your heart.

It so often happens that for many of us, Mass becomes just a Sunday thing. We don't prioritize God the way we should to the point of really changing us.

Maybe we are too busy or God has become a bother... it happens... maybe you are just waiting for Jesus to shake your world again... but you don't need to wait for an apocalyptic wake up call, to hit rock bottom in order to feel the weight of needing to take a step forward in your spiritual life, you need simply to make the decision to make Jesus your priority.

If you cannot unlock that door, then give Jesus the permission to do it for you. What will come next if you do?

I just invite you into a moment of personal prayer.

Lord, give us the grace to be generous with you. Put in our hearts the desire to make you a priority in our lives. Renew the hope we find in your promise so that it motivates us to chose you over everything else. Help us trust that doing so will not be overwhelming, will not be a burden, will not be exhausting. Help us be patient with what you are asking of us. Amen.

Welcome to the beginning.

+ Fr. Carlos