

Forty Weeks ~ Sacred Story



Week Fifteen Encouragements & Wisdom

E & W reflections are additional helps for your Sacred Story prayer journey. Reflect on them ahead of your prayer exercises for the week or outside of your fifteen-minute prayer windows during the week.

Beginning A Monthly Habit of Reconciliation for your Sacred Story

In the next weeks, I will be sending you some of your reflections on the experience of making a whole-life confession. It is profoundly encouraging to hear from your fellow pilgrims on this journey how God is working in their lives. Now that you have made this whole-life confession, I strongly urge those of you who do not yet have a monthly practice of Reconciliation to begin one. Next to the Eucharist, I can think of no better resource in the spiritual life for finding balance, peace, a discerning heart and growth in interior freedom than regular Reconciliation.

For this week's E & W, I offer some advice on how we can keep our peaceful heart even while allowing Christ to regularly come to us in your weaknesses and sinfulness. Some who engage St. Ignatius' spiritual discipline say they feel they are digging in old wounds and sins, which leaves them discouraged or depressed. Some think it is not helpful. If this is the case for you, it will be worth your while to train your heart to focus on hope and trust as you look at the patterns and issues that diminish your freedom, wholeness and holiness in a regular practice of Reconciliation.

St. Ignatius described looking at his failings and weaknesses as bringing him hope because his heart was focused on God while he did this, not himself. We have to train our hearts to be aware of the chronic patterns and sin, addiction and vice in our lives, keeping our eyes on Christ—not on our failings. This takes practice and grace—and patience!

I would like to offer you some “wisdom and encouragement” to help train you to do what St. Ignatius learned to do. One or other of these ideas will speak to you. Use it from now on so

you can stay in the present moment, with your eyes on Christ while you let him heal, teach and instruct you through his gift of Sacramental Reconciliation. Ask for God's help on how you can best grow in faith while being clear-sighted about failings, sin and weakness. You *will* be given the grace.

Listen to the Advocate, Not the Accuser

In Revelations 12: 10-11, we hear that Satan, the enemy of our human nature, is the “accuser of the brethren” who accused us day and night before God—but is now “cast down.” Evil works to accuse so that we become discouraged and disheartened. But Jesus is our Advocate and defender. In 1 Jn. 2:1, we hear that “if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus the righteous.” Jesus is our first Advocate and he sends the Spirit as an Advocate to be with us till the end of time.

When you allow yourself to examine patterns in your history that cause you difficulties and are the source of sin—become conscious of both Jesus and the Holy Spirit as your Advocates. They are helping you heal and become whole. Focus on them, not the accuser who wants to discourage you so you lose hope. Know if you are discouraged and start to lose hope, it is the “accuser's” voice you are listening to, not the Advocate's. If you become discouraged, then call upon the Advocate to help you find hope and peace. Awaken to your spiritual nature, learn how the accuser discourages you and make the conscious choice to call upon your Advocate!

Seek Christ's Perspective on Your Life

No one grows in wholeness and faith by simply focusing on their failures and sinfulness. *Sacred Story* is trying to help you gain Christ's perspective on your *patterns* of failure and sinfulness. Imagine instead I was your golf coach. You keep slicing your ball and your game never improves. I might take a video of your swing and have you look at it. When you can *see* what you are doing wrong, then you have the chance to fix it.

Apply this golf analogy to looking at the *patterns* of sin and failure in your life. With Christ by your side, note the *patterns* of sin and failure (and their links with compulsions, addictions, vices and the “negative” people in your story) that keep dogging you. With Christ's perspective, ask to see how it all is linked together in your history. It can be embarrassing at times to watch yourself (your embarrassing swing), but Christ is with you to help you grow and to encourage you. Ask for the grace for Christ to be with you as together you watch the *patterns* of failure and sin so that you can grow in greater freedom and peace.

Jesus the Divine Physician

Jesus is our divine physician. We have used this title regularly for Jesus in our *Sacred Story* lessons. Take great comfort in St. Augustine's view of Jesus as his divine physician. The

following passage is taken from one of the most famous passage in the *Confessions*:

Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created. You were with me, but I was not with you. Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would have not been at all. You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace.

See, I do not hide my wounds; you are the Physician and I am sick; you are merciful, I in need of mercy...On your exceedingly great mercy, and on that alone, rests all my hope.¹

A Glorious Morning and the Cawing Crow

A Jesuit friend described how in peace and tranquility while praying outdoors on a summer morning, a big, black crow demanded attention as it squawked and cawed on a nearby roof. My friend became angry and suddenly realized he could not see the morning's beauty any more. He was struck by the transformation in his peaceful consciousness and had a revelation. He told me that evil demands attention and tries to make itself the *only* thing we see. There can be beauty all around and evil, just like that crow, forces me to see only it! He learned a lesson that morning.

We need to learn this lesson too. We all have crows in our life history. Black, cawing and squawking, they demand we focus exclusively on them till we can feel and believe there is no good in us at all. This is a strategy of evil one St. Ignatius called the enemy of our human nature. My black squawking crows need attending to but this can only be done if I keep my eyes on the beauty and mercy of Christ's love for me. Christ has won my salvation and the forgiveness of my sins—my crows. He is the ever-beautiful morning—the Daystar—on whom I need fix my eyes and heart at all times.

Love Casts Out Fear

Sometimes when we get discouraged and fearful in attending to our weaknesses and sinfulness, it simply means we are novices in the spiritual life. The mystics call this novice period, *purgation*. Remember the three accounts of Ignatius' near-death experiences? In the first he was fearful, in the second he was sad for taking so long in life to surrender to God, and in the third, he was filled with ardent love of God. Ignatius is describing for us the three classic three stages of spiritual maturity: *purgation, illumination and union*. Like Ignatius, we grow in trust

¹ *The Confessions*: Book X, Chapter XXVII.

and faith slowly over time. Yet, as we grow, our awareness of God's love for us increases, especially in our weaknesses and failures. This growth from fear to love is perfectly captured in the First Letter of St. John 4: 16-18.

We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us.

God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him.

In this is love brought to perfection among us, that we have confidence on the day of judgment because as he is, so are we in this world.

There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment, and so one who fears is not yet perfect in love.

So if you are fearful in looking at honestly at your life, tell the Lord: "I am new at this, dear Lord. Please give me patience and confidence that you love me and are patient with me as I mature in my faith. Thank you for hearing my prayer, Jesus!"

Not Ready For a Savior

Sometimes we can be angry at being invited to look at the weaknesses and sinfulness in our lives because we don't want to admit we need God. We remember St. Augustine's lament in the *Confessions*—"Lord make me chaste—but not yet!"

The most important spiritual book for St. Ignatius was Thomas à Kempis', *The Imitation of Christ*. St. Ignatius would have read this short paragraph many times:

Whoever is weak in spirit, given to the flesh, and inclined to sensual things can, but only with great difficulty, drag himself away from his earthly desires. Therefore, he is often gloomy and sad when he is trying to pull himself away from them, and easily gives into anger should someone attempt to oppose him.

It is helpful in the spiritual life to examine *resistances*. If we resist positive invitations to spiritual growth, perhaps it is as simple as the fact that we might not be ready to admit we need a Savior. "Lord make me "X"...but not yet!" Being honest about pride that does not want a savior is the first step to opening to the Savior of all.

The Price of Our Salvation

Several years ago I was in my clerics in a large airport the day a major story about priest abuse appeared in all the newspapers. It felt to me like people read the newspaper headlines, looked up at me in my collar and passed judgment on me. I remember wanting to say, "I did not do it." I reflected on my experience after I got on the plane. I thought, no, I did not do that but like the rest of humanity, I am not without sin. "He who is without sin cast the first stone," Jesus told the crowd wanting to stone the woman caught in adultery (Jn. 8:7). We read in 1 Jn. 1: 8-10:

If we say, "We are without sin," we deceive ourselves, and

the truth is not in us. If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing. If we say, "We have not sinned," we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

St. Ignatius was insistent that we discover why we need a Savior. Truth be told, the sins of any of us, as little as they might seem, required Jesus' supreme act of love that brought him to the cross. The process of feeling our sinfulness, knowing Jesus' atoning act of love, and finally experiencing the gratitude of the gift of our forgiveness and salvation, is the engine that drives evangelization in the Church. We should all pray to know the price of our salvation and why we need Jesus as Savior. So awareness of sin and understanding the price of our salvation by Christ are the first steps towards engaging the Christian mystery. Welcome them!

When Digging in Old Wounds Is Good

Countless times as a kid I remember falling down and scraping my knees or elbows. Those wounds were painful and the last thing I wanted was someone washing it after the blood dried—even if the wound was infected. Because quite frankly, an infected wound did not seem to hurt as much as I knew the washing and alcohol would. Yet as adults, we know that an infected wound, even one that does not hurt, is dangerous. The cleaning with disinfectant while painful is therapeutic.

Spiritual wounds of sin can be viewed in this light. After a while, the wounds in our hearts and souls, like our skin wounds, crust over. Allowing the divine physician to clean them can terrify us. This anticipated fear is what makes some of us feel that digging in old wounds is not good. Yet, when the heart and soul are infected, damage is happening that needs spiritual therapy. The short-term pain must be transformed in our consciousness as a positive experience. How many times I have heard after whole-life confessions, "This was the most difficult thing I have done, and also the very best thing as well." So invite the divine physician to dig in any and all old, infected spiritual wounds. It just may be the most difficult and also the very best thing you can do in your life right now.

Advice from the Master—St. Ignatius

Ignatius provides wise counsel for those discouraged by evil thoughts and feelings and how to conduct yourself during such times of temptation. He writes this advice to Dominican sister Theresa Rejadell:

I insist that you think of God as loving you, as I have no doubt He does, and that you correspond with this love and pay no attention whatever to the evil thoughts, even if they are obscene or sensual (when they are not deliberate), nor of your cowardice or tepidity. For even

St. Peter and St. Paul did not succeed in escaping all or some of these thoughts. Even when we do not succeed fully, we gain much by paying no attention to them. I am not going to save myself by the good works of the good angels, and I am not going to be condemned because of the evil thoughts and weaknesses which bad angels, the flesh, and the world bring before my mind.

God asks only one thing of me, that my soul seek to be conformed with His Divine Majesty. And the soul so conformed makes the body conformed, whether it wish it or not, to the divine will. In this is our greatest battle, and here the good pleasure of the eternal and sovereign Goodness. May our Lord by His infinite kindness and grace hold us always in His hand.²



² *St. Ignatius' Own Story*, trans. William J. Young, SJ. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1980), 25.