

ICON OF THE FATHER

*33 Days to Entrustment
to Saint Joseph*

*Understanding the Church
in the Light of Joseph
and the Holy Family*

Joshua Elzner

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INTRODUCTION

In my previous work, *Sheltered Within Her Heart: 33 Days to Deeper Entrustment to Mary*, I sought to give a “straight shot” to the heart of the Gospel through the heart of our blessed Mother. I sought to walk with contemplative gaze into the inmost bosom of the Trinity’s intimacy, which has been made accessible to us in the Crucified and Risen Christ, an intimacy in which Mary has gone before us and which she already lives, in radiant light, in her very glorified flesh. I sought to receive and reverence this awesome gift of redemption, of salvation by God for God, in the spirit of the Virgin Mary, Bride and Mother. For it is truly she who first, and in the name of all of us, welcomed and reciprocated the love of the heavenly Bridegroom and lived the fullness of filiation before the Father of all. In a particular way, I sought to unveil the beauty of the Love that lies at the foundation of our human experience and which is the ground of all that exists, the “key” in which alone all things reveal their authentic meaning and truth. And I tried to show that this Love has a tender, *maternal* face, enfolding and permeating us and every moment of our life with intimate care.

In this book, I want to provide a complementary image, developing on the relationships that have deepened through the contemplative love and prayer that *Sheltered* sought to open up. As that book sought to be only an aid to a deeper entrustment to Mary, and, with her, in her, and through her, to the immeasurable love of the Trinity himself, so this book seeks to be only an aid to growing in understanding of, and reverence for, Saint Joseph, and thus an invitation to deeper relationship with him. Through both of them, Mary and Joseph, we find the Trinity’s life in a particular way made accessible to us, unveiled before us, and inviting us. What Mary illumines from the perspective of femininity, Joseph illumines from that of *masculinity*. Thus these two books can be understood as a diptych, a two-paneled image centered upon the hinge-point of Christ. Or rather, in fact, these two books and another, *Responding to the Thirst of God: 40 Days to the Heart of Love*, create a triptych that humbly seeks to illustrate the central realities of our human existence bathed in the light of God’s grace, and to draw us to the center-point where all fulfillment is found in the everlasting embrace of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

On the one hand, we have the irradiation of God’s beauty into this world in and through Mary, the Immaculate One who reflects the primordial beauty of God more than any human creature ever has. She stands before God in the virginal-bridal stance of perfect receptivity and reciprocity, thus allowing the whole of creation itself to be lifted up, carried, and fulfilled in her in union with God. Joseph, on the other hand, finds himself caught up in a mystery that so far surpasses him, and yet which cradles him with incredible tenderness and intimacy, and all the resources of his humanity are harnessed in sheltering and loving the Blessed Virgin and the Child conceived and born of her. Thus he is a custodian of the mysteries of God, and he invites all of us to “step into his shoes,” to learn to love as he loved, and indeed also to entrust ourselves to his care, to be sheltered and

loved, fathered and protected by him, just as were Mary and Jesus.

These two persons teach us so much! Of course we can never adequately speak of one without deeply addressing the other as well, since their lives were so beautifully united, inseparable, not merely on the basis of natural marriage, but on the basis of their virginal communion in the sight of the Trinity and their radical, total participation in the salvific mystery which is Christ. Even in the complementarity of their masculinity and femininity, Joseph and Mary teach us so much, casting light deeply into our own existence and experience of life. These two poles of reciprocal relationship were, after all, designed by God himself to be a manifestation of the nature of *all* love, and, even if inadequately, to be a sign of the very inner life of the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Masculine and feminine: donation and reception, tender strength and strong tenderness, outpouring gift and womb-like sheltering, begetting and bringing-to-birth. The path back into the heart of our loving God passes by way of the dual “road” of masculinity and femininity, understood and lived in their original, God-ordained meaning and beauty—and yet both also lead to the innermost sanctuary where they converge in the virginal mystery in which we all stand naked, in the solitary sanctuary of the heart, before God.

But this book is not an abstract reflection on the qualities of masculinity and femininity. How disrespectful it would be to speak of Mary and Joseph as if they were impersonal incarnations of traits of being, as if they were mere archetypes! So too, it would be disrespectful to speak of them as if they were merely “there” to fulfill our needs, to ease our insecurities, to intercede for our cares! No, let us walk together deeper into *authentic love*, which is born of a disinterested delight in the unique beauty of each person, the unrepeatable beloved of God that they are: Mary and Joseph, our spiritual parents, but also our friends, and above all, unique individuals cherished by God.

In these reflections let us only try to stand before the awesome mystery of God’s Love revealed in history, revealed with particular intensity in Mary, in Joseph, in the intimacy of the Holy Family, and let it pour forth its beauty to touch, heal, and ravish our hearts, making us whole in the love and communion for which we were created and redeemed. Yes, as per the subject of these reflections, let us reflect on the beauty of the man Joseph of Nazareth, the chaste husband of the Virgin Mary and the foster father of Jesus Christ. I want to reverence who he is in himself, to love him together with you; and, in this reverence, to also allow him to teach us the ways of God—indeed to educate us in the heart of God—in the manner that he is so capable of doing, having been so close to the breathtaking beauty of the Incarnate Christ and his Mother, and having been chosen to be a representative, before the very Son of God, of the face of the heavenly Father.

This is why I have chosen to entitle this book *Icon of the Father*. For this is what Saint Joseph reveals to us in his concrete existence. By simply being a man, a true and whole man, a holy man, and by loving those entrusted to his care, he became a transparent reflection of the Father of us all. He became a manifestation of the true meaning of paternity, masculin-

ity, and spousal love as it finds its origin in the bosom of the eternal Trinity and is manifest in the flesh-and-blood living of daily human life in body and spirit.

+ + +

It is apparent that one of the greatest troubles of our contemporary world is *a crisis of fatherhood*. And yet this is rooted, even more deeply, in a crisis of *masculinity*. What does it truly mean to be a man? This is a question that we can hardly even ask anymore, even less adequately answer. The reason that we are so incapable of approaching an answer to this question lies even deeper: it is because we have lost the face of the origin of all masculinity, the One whom we address when we say “Our Father, who art in heaven.”

Further, while the givenness of the genders—in their unique gifts and limitations, in their openness toward and directedness to one another—is being called into question in our contemporary culture, it is difficult to get a glimpse of the true, God-ordained meaning of masculinity. But man needs woman in order to understand himself, and woman needs man in order to understand herself. And even more fundamentally, they both need to trace the lines of their very being back to the ultimate Origin, God himself, who transcends the boundaries of masculine and feminine while fulfilling all their richness within himself. From his utter fullness, in which all the beauty of masculinity and femininity take their origin, he is the richness of all that is found, parceled out, in the concrete being of man and woman. And in a certain sense only together, in the reciprocal relationship of authentic love, do man and woman again establish and understand the pristine “image of God” in its wholeness: for this image is precisely one of relationship, of communion, of gift and acceptance and reciprocal gift, of intimacy in mutual indwelling. This is because the very being of God is Love: it is the everlasting embrace of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And while each one of us truly finds our fulfillment in the direct, solitary intimacy with the Persons of the Trinity, in mystical prayer and in the intimacy of holiness, we should not neglect either the “horizontal” dimension of our being, so lovingly fashioned by God to irradiate this world, and all human relationships, with his own life and love. In other words, we should not neglect the beauty of human communion that is truly pure and transparent to the love of the Trinity. And this, precisely, is the mystery of the Holy Family, the cradle of love in which the Son of God was born and raised. So too, only in the deep harmony of both dimensions—the vertical dimension of the intimate union of each person with God and the horizontal dimension of the communion of the children of God in truth and love—is the full mystery of the Church made evident before our gaze and able to permeate our life.

To return to masculinity and femininity, therefore, the words of this book, are intended just as much for women as for men: for men so they may understand true masculinity, and for women that they may understand true femininity, and for men so that they may understand femininity, and for women that they may understand masculinity. And for both that

they may understand God: the unity at the origin of the sexes, as well as their true, everlasting consummation. And that we may all, women and men alike, revere and love our spiritual father and companion, Saint Joseph, who lives in the Church until today, present with his paternal care, participating in the all-enfolding and all-pervading love of the eternal Father of us all, as his icon and his cooperator.

Note:

Please take your time with these meditations, and by no means feel the need to finish them within the allotted days. Take as long as you desire, listening to the voice of God speaking to you uniquely, personally, through my imperfect words. I have sought simply to open up a space where he can speak, and where you can let your voice echo in response, in the context of the throbbing heartbeat of beauty that is his self-gift as Trinity, and his invitation for you to share in his own life of intimacy and joy.

WEEK I

From the
Top Down

DAY 1
JOSEPH OF NAZARETH:
STANDING AT THE HEART OF THE MYSTERY

“Joseph did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took his wife” (cf. *Mt* 1 :24).

Inspired by the Gospel, the Fathers of the Church from the earliest centuries stressed that just as St. Joseph took loving care of Mary and gladly dedicated himself to Jesus Christ’s upbringing, he likewise watches over and protects Christ’s Mystical Body, that is, the Church, of which the Virgin Mary is the exemplar and model.

... I wish to offer for your consideration, dear brothers and sisters, some reflections concerning him “into whose custody God entrusted his most precious treasures.” I gladly fulfill this pastoral duty so that all may grow in devotion to the Patron of the Universal Church and in love for the Savior whom he served in such an exemplary manner.

In this way the whole Christian people not only will turn to St. Joseph with greater fervor and invoke his patronage with trust, but also will always keep before their eyes his humble, mature way of serving and of “taking part” in the plan of salvation.

I am convinced that by reflection upon the way that Mary’s spouse shared in the divine mystery, the Church—on the road towards the future with all of humanity—will be enabled to discover ever anew her own identity within this redemptive plan, which is founded on the mystery of the Incarnation.

This is precisely the mystery in which Joseph of Nazareth “shared” like no other human being except Mary, the Mother of the Incarnate Word. He shared in it with her; he was involved in the same salvific event; he was the guardian of the same love, through the power of which the eternal Father “destined us to be his sons through Jesus Christ” (Eph 1:5). (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Custos*, n. 1)

These words of Saint John Paul II—at the introduction of his own apostolic exhortation, *Redemptoris Custos*, “Guardian of the Redeemer”—express what my hopes are for this humble book as well. The pope, in line with the tradition of the earliest beginnings, links the “custodianship” of Saint Joseph over the Holy Family with his patronage of the universal Church itself. In other words, there is a link between the “little family” and the “universal family,” the little family in Nazareth and the universal family of the worldwide Church. And the link is precisely that trait which is most appropriate to the family, and without which the family cannot live: love and intimacy in the truth born of God, born of sharing in the life of God.

Unity in the truth lies at the heart of all human existence as its deepest foundation and its highest fulfillment, and even though fractured profoundly by sin, all human hearts aspire unto this unity still. This illumines so much for us. It shows that the precondition of true unity and intimacy is not merely closeness, merely love as desire, but *truth*. It is a sharing, to-

gether, in the one truth that unites us. And yet this truth is not a stale or abstract matter, but living love...yes, the truth, in fact, is the Love-Communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and all that is true of reality seen and understood in this light. Thus, too, we understand that the human family is a school of love and unity, of the common pursuit of truth, as is society and culture itself, insofar as it remains faithful to its inherent vocation and purpose. Indeed, the Church of Christ is that space, that family home, where such unity, because of the truth revealed and given by God in Jesus Christ, is definitively restored.

In a special way, Joseph is a witness and a safeguard of the true nature of the Church throughout time. He reminds us that the essence of the Church is *personal love and communion in the truth*, that we may always have it before our eyes, against all the forces of impersonalism, mere institutionalization, relativism, error, scandal, sin, or abstraction which threaten to obscure it. He is here to redirect our gaze, however much we, as fallen human beings, are tempted to lose sight of the Church's true face and her beautiful heart. Above all, he is here to turn our eyes back to the Virgin Mother who holds a Child in her arms, and to this Child who is the very Incarnation of God's Love for us: the Son of the heavenly Father made man.

Yes, just as Mary always leads us closer to Christ, so Joseph leads us closer to both of them, Mother and Child. His passion, as a true husband and father, is for those entrusted into his care. He knows and loves them, just as he delights in being known and loved by them. And his deepest, most passionate desire is to lead us into the same sacred space in which he was granted to live throughout his life: into the intimate home of Nazareth where God makes human life a living participation in the very love and intimacy of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

My hope for this book, therefore, is that "by reflection upon the way that Mary's spouse shared in the divine mystery, the Church...will be enabled to discover ever anew her own identity within this redemptive plan, which is founded on the mystery of the Incarnation." In other words, by looking to Joseph and his participation in the family centered around the Incarnate Jesus, the Church can experience anew her own identity. She can experience again, and ever anew throughout history, that she is the family born of God's redeeming love, the space where fragmented humanity is again gathered into unity in the likeness of the Trinity. Indeed, she can come to the awareness that Joseph, and she in him and with him, is a "guardian of the same love": the love that is God himself, present first in the womb of Mary, and then growing up in the orbit of a breathtaking intimacy, both human and divine.

Joseph is truly a father, even if not biologically, of the Incarnate Christ, God's eternal Son made flesh. And he humbly received from God the great gift and task of sheltering and caring for him—as for his Virgin Mother—in the home of Nazareth. And his fatherhood does not end with his earthly life, but, at the dawn of redemption, attains universal proportions. He becomes the custodian of the whole people of God. Just as his fatherly gaze

and tender strength created the secure space of that little home in Nazareth, where God worked tremendous miracles of love and intimacy, so too this same presence watches over the Church throughout history.

Again, the two homes are not essentially different: the little home in Nazareth and the world-embracing home of the Church. The first was already the Church, in her earliest origin as a community of disciples gathered around the Son of God in faith, hope, and love. And on Pentecost, this reality that had already been lived in the hiddenness of Nazareth bursts forth as a gift for all of humanity, welcoming us into the same mystery of love and communion.

It is precisely this communion, this intimacy that Christ opens up to us in his redeeming mission, first of all through his hidden life among us for thirty years, then through his active ministry in the land of Palestine, and finally through his Paschal Mystery: his Eucharist, Passion, and Resurrection. By all of this, he has opened up a space for us—carved out a place in the very midst of the world—where we can enter into profound communion with him, in the intimacy he shares eternally with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and into communion with each one of our brothers and sisters, also loved and redeemed by him.

DAY 2 FROM THE HEART OF THE FATHER

At the origin of all things lies the Father. He is the Origin of origins, the Fullness from which all the richness of being flows. He is, eternally, the One who begets in love his beloved Son, cherishing him with a gaze of tenderness and delight, and sheltering the Son in the delicacy of his divine embrace. In the breath of the Spirit of their love, in the bond of their mutual affirming gaze and reciprocal self-donation, the Father and the Son are forever united in mutual belonging. They are made one in the joy of a knowledge and love that is so intimate, so deep, so total, that they live totally within one another a single life, while remaining two distinct Persons. And their union is always fulfilled with the third, the Spirit, whom, together, they cherish and love, constituting thus the everlasting and all-holy Trinity.

Already in this divine origin—in the bosom of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—lies all that will exist throughout time and space. In God, from all eternity, is hidden the rich reciprocity of masculinity and femininity, is hidden the meaning of the family, is present in fact the seed of all the relationships that mark us as human beings in the fabric of history. From the Trinity all has been born, like multitudinous rays of light refracting from the white-hot, undivided center of a prism. And to him all will, at the end, return, like lines converging on a single point, like shards drawn together by a single magnetism, harmonizing in a single place of harmony and communion.

Indeed, all forms of being and relation throughout the universe, even non-personal ones (like the very nature of animals or science or logic or beauty), take their origin from the primal relationality of the Trinity and will return thence at the consummation of all things at the end of time. But there are certain relations that have priority in our experience and in God's plan for us in this world. These relationships lie at the foundation of our experience as persons created in the image and likeness of God. Precisely in the light of these, we can come to understand ourselves in deepest truth, and, in the light of this truth, to live in authentic freedom and happiness. "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:32).

The first of these relations is *childhood*: sonship or daughterhood. I have spoken in great depth of this foundation of our identity in the book on entrustment to Mary (and in fact in all of my books), so I will not revisit it with the same length now. Let me only say that it is childhood—being born from Love, for Love, and in Love, as a uniquely beloved son or daughter, unlike any other person who has ever been or ever will be—that constitutes me as the unique person that I am. It is the foundation of my identity as a created person fashioned in the image of the uncreated, eternal Son of the Father. This is not just a poetic allegory, a matter of emphasis, but a matter of ontological truth. I am, in my inmost being, *beloved*. I am a son or a daughter of the heavenly Father. This is my identity, the unceasing

wellspring of my very being. I am seen, known, loved, and created by the Father, within the beloved Son and after his likeness, and brought, by the breath of the Spirit, into existence.*

The second relation, flowing from the first as its mature expression and extension, is *spousehood*. This is the love that is characterized by a total gift of self to another, and by receptive openness to welcome and care for the other forever, without conditions or limit. Along with childhood (the relation of parent and child, of fatherhood and filiality), spousal love and belonging marks the nature of God's dealings with humanity throughout history. His covenant with us is always simultaneously a covenant of *adoption* and a covenant of *marriage*. Whenever God created man and woman at the beginning of time, he created them as children before a Father, as beloved son and daughter bathed in the light of his own creating and affirming gaze. And, in this primal gift of his love, he also entrusted them to one another, in the nakedness of their bodily reciprocity (which manifested and incarnated reciprocity of the spirit), as man and woman oriented to intimacy in mutual self-giving: in spousal love.

But there is an important point to emphasize here: namely, that there is a primal relation at the foundation of spousehood, namely, *virginal friendship*, in which alone spousehood can manifest its true meaning. Rooted as this spousal relation is in the primacy of childhood,* of belonging to God as Father, man and woman related to one another first in a spirit of virginity, of chaste friendship, of pure and disinterested affirmation, before, according to the will of God, manifesting their love also in the choice and expression of spousal gift. This primacy of the virginal, of recognizing that the other belongs to God in the integrity of their being before they belong to me, will be important later on in these reflections. And it is also simply important in life: for even the spousal love of man and woman is rooted first in their friendship, a friendship chaste to the core, on which alone the conjugal union and fruitfulness of marriage can be built and from which alone it can organically emerge (and which it is really simply meant to express). This also is a deeply needed antidote to the sexual illnesses of our world, which, on both sides of the spectrum—whether liberalistic or rigidly fearful—struggle to see the possibility of a chaste relation of man and woman that excludes the need or even desire for sexual and marital expression.

*To speak of this relation as the foundation of identity is not to deny the *new* reality of childhood that is the fruit of Baptism, the graced participation in the inner life of the Trinity. In fact, even our very natural being is oriented toward this supernatural reality and in it alone finds its fulfillment. Thus we could speak of a natural childhood, analogous but true, which nonetheless is wholly ordered to find full blossoming in the radiant consummation of intimacy between ourselves and the three divine Persons, a reality possible only by grace, in justification, sanctification, and glorification.

*Human spousal love is rooted not only in childhood before God, but also in a primal *spousal* orientation towards God himself, towards Christ the divine Bridegroom, in relation to whom alone the longings of the human heart for all that conjugal love expresses can find definitive and boundless fulfillment. This is so important! I wish I could dwell more on it, but this is not the place. See the book *Responding to the Third of God*, for example, for a deeper treatment of this reality.

Let us, however, get back to the primal relations that we experience and manifest as human persons made in the image and likeness of the Trinity. From childhood spousehood blossoms. And from spousehood, what flowers? Can you guess? ... *Parenthood*. From the rich living of spousal love and intimacy, the third relation emerges, organically and freely (not apart from spousehood, or separate from it, but within it): this is the relation of fatherhood and motherhood. These three relations, archetypal in the way that they reveal something profound about the nature of God himself, are like three concentric circles, each of the latter contained within the former, or, perhaps even better, like ripples cast from the center: I am first a child, and, being a child, I can also be a spouse; and, being a spouse, I can also be a father or mother. And thus the circle begins again, with the begetting of a new human life, a new child, who will also, in his own right, become a husband and a father, or a wife and a mother.

But these three relations, as central as they are for all human existence, rooting us in the very origin of our experience as an infant in the arms of our father and mother, and reaching into the depths of our hearts' longing for intimacy with another person, are held by the pure *primacy of the person* which transcends the limits of any particular category of relationship. They can manifest themselves freely because they are subjected to this primary law of love: that the person always takes primacy, and that communion occurs in God, in the light of the Trinity, before it occurs on the basis of natural human categories. These categories, of course, have been designed by God, and I do not intend to neglect their importance or primacy. I only intend to say that there is something even *more* primary: the pure belonging of each person to God, and the convergence of all of our hearts in his sheltering embrace, in which all the temporal categories of love and relationship are simultaneously affirmed and surpassed.

All of these relations, taken only in their temporal expressions, are too narrow to bring ultimate fulfillment; they are original foundations of earthly experience in which our hearts love, relate, grow, and blossom. But they point to, and grow into, something beyond them. They teach us a lot, but they cannot teach us everything. Our hearts must trace their way back, beyond the created image, beyond the imperfect icon, to the uncreated Reality, yes, to find the fullness of this totality, this reciprocity, this openness—and all else that marks a mature love—not in natural childhood, spousal love, or parenthood, but in *virginal consummation of relationship with God*. What reflects God in the temporal order of human relationships also stirs our hearts to press on, with ardent longing and heartfelt desire, to the fulfillment of the promise of these relationships in something that far transcends them, while also super-affirming everything that was good and true about them.

Human childhood points to our dependence before and communion with the eternal Father, and human spousehood points to a profound intimacy with the Son of God that surpasses the spousal paradigm into the utterly virginal, and fruitfulness is born from this communion in the likeness of the eternally-fecund intimacy of the Father and the Son in their one

Holy Spirit. Thus, in the new creation, such natural relations shall pass away, and yet all shall be fulfilled in the *virginal mystery*, which simply means in the direct, total, and unmediated participation of all human hearts in the innermost life of the Trinity.*

For at the end of time, that flowing-forth of all things from the white-hot center into a multitude of colors will come “full circle,” as all flows back to the center anew, and is here made one in unity, simplicity, and harmony, while each singular reality is also affirmed, sheltered, and safeguarded in its own unique beauty and truth. All will surge back anew into the inmost embrace of the Trinity, who has redeemed us through Christ, and, in Christ, brings all to “recapitulation.” Recapitulation means bringing all together in a single Head, in the Head and Bridegroom of the Church, who introduces us into the fulfillment of adoption, into the consummation of marriage, into the expansive radiance of pure fruitfulness. All is here fulfilled, in every category and beyond all categories, in all multiplicity and beyond all multiplicity, where singularity and universality converge, where the individual and the community are harmonized in love, by sharing directly in the life of God. For here all knowledge, all love, all relationship, will be a pure and unmediated participation in the innermost life and intimacy of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three Persons in one God.

*There is a danger for us, as fallen humans, of relating to God precisely on the basis of our “human categories,” of placing God in a box or of turning to him as the fulfillment of our needs and desires, rather than as the living, all-transcendent God who is far beyond anything to which we may try to reduce him. The impulse of the heart of a John of the Cross is deeply needed here. John was not afraid to use spousal imagery to express the union of God and the human heart, and yet his spousal imagery was burst asunder, purified, and ultimately left aside, simply serving as it did the union of humanity with the all-surpassing Trinity, who fulfills all that is good and true in creation while being its ultimate Origin and also far beyond it in his uncreated Mystery of Love and Intimacy as Trinity.

DAY 3
GOD MADE MANIFEST (PART 1)

In our ordinary experience, we come to know God through the medium of created realities and human relationships. We come to know the divine fatherhood through a created father; we come to know the ardor of divine love through the glimpses given by pure human love; we come to glimpse the divine beauty through its fragments shining from the midst of all created beauty. But in the previous reflection, I sought to follow the lines in the opposite direction: from the heart of God outward, into the rich fabric of creation, and then back again.

To view reality this way is important, since this is precisely the way that it has occurred in actual truth, from “the top-down,” the way that things look *from God’s perspective*, in their authentic nature. This is in fact the whole meaning of life: to return to the embrace of the Trinity and to find in him the fullness of happiness, and only from this place to look upon, understand, and love all things. In starting immediately with the inmost mystery of the Trinity, however, I fear that the authentic *beauty* of the reality of which I speak will not “connect” with the reader, that it will not truly resonate in your heart and experience, but rather seem to be no more than an abstract idea. Even *words* about the Trinity, however beautiful, can appear empty and meaningless unless a person has first, through God’s grace, come to know and experience the *love* of the Trinity. And yet, as a relationship of intimate love deepens between God and the human heart, the Trinity’s presence becomes more and more real, more and more vivid, until words themselves are bursting with meaning and reaching out towards the fullness of the mystery that transcends all that words, in their frailty, can express. But how, in the first place, can we encounter God, who is invisible, and whose presence we cannot feel in the ordinary manner of human presence (but ultimately can feel infinitely more deeply and intimately both by the senses of the soul and by the mystical operation of grace)?

This is precisely the importance of God’s self-revelation in history. Yes, he reveals himself ceaselessly in all manner of ways, in nature, in human life, in the very structure of our person in mind, will, and affectivity, in body and spirit; but above all he unveils his being and his love through *his self-communication in history*. This self-communication passes by way of *covenants*, bonds of intimate love that he establishes, on his own initiative, with his children—bonds that always bear a character both *parental* and *spousal*. These covenants began at the beginning of time with Adam and Eve, then passed through Noah, and then grew with the chosen people of Israel, in covenants with Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David. And yet this covenant work of God in the world came to a climax, to its fullest gift and expression, in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ in our world—in the making-flesh of the very Son of God, the second Person of the Holy Trinity. And this fullness, never to be surpassed, is perpetuated and unfolded in depth

and clarity until the end of time in the womb and life of the Church, who is “the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15-16), indeed, the Bride and Body of the Son of God himself (cf. Eph 5:27; 1 Cor 12:12; Eph 4:4).

In other words, God speaks through history, through writing himself and his love into every moment of our lives and into the unfolding of the whole history of humanity. It was in the “fullness of time” (Gal 4:4), at the peak of a historical movement of love and fatherly care, after centuries of dramatic events unfolding in God’s covenant relationship with his people, that the inner mystery of the Trinity was able to unveil itself before our faith-filled gaze, and to draw us back to the center-point that gives meaning to all things. And yet now that this revelation has occurred, we have the awesome gift and opportunity to “re-read” the whole of history, indeed the whole of reality, from within the center-point, from the place of convergence where all lines come together in the welcoming embrace of the Trinity. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says:

The Fathers of the Church distinguish between theology (*theologia*) and economy (*oikonomia*). “Theology” refers to the mystery of God’s inmost life within the Blessed Trinity and “economy” to all the works by which God reveals himself and communicates his life. Through the *oikonomia* the *theologia* is revealed to us; but conversely, the *theologia* illuminates the whole *oikonomia*. God’s works reveal who he is in himself; the mystery of his inmost being enlightens our understanding of all his works. So it is, analogously, among human persons. A person discloses himself in his actions, and the better we know a person, the better we understand his actions. (par. 236)

God’s inner being, in other words, first became known to us through his *external activity* within the world. Without this activity, by which he extended himself lovingly into time and space, we would never have come to know him, and certainly not to have known him as Father, Son, and Spirit—as Trinity. But in the light of his self-revelation, in the light of *who*

*It is also quite significant that the word *oikonomia* refers to the household, the family (since in Hebrew and Greek there is no separate word for family). Thus we can extend this to infer not only that God’s *activity* in the world reveals his inner nature, but that his household, the home and family that he has created (the Church) manifests who he is in his innermost life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From this, too, is born the deep desire for the full reunion of all believers in a single Church (the word for this is *ecumenism*, from the same root), according to the prayer of Jesus himself: “I pray that they may all be one, even as you, Father, are in me, and I am in you” (cf. Jn 17).

*Benedict XVI gave great insight to the central “word” spoken through John Paul II in this perspective. It is worth reflecting on, as it sheds light on our own topic, and on what is coming later in these reflections:

“Beginning with anthropology and searching for an answer to what is human existence, he [JPII] comes to God—to the Trinitarian love of God—and returns from this to man, because his Trinitarian vision is not [merely] ... a meditation on what is God in himself, but makes us understand how God is God-in-history. In the deepest mystery of the Trinitarian existence, we are also encountering the concrete possibilities that God, who is himself relation and dialogue, can create history, can be present in history. ... Christianity [is] not an idealism, outside of concrete historical reality, but is creating community, creating solidarity.”

we have come to know him to be, we can interpret his *activity* anew with greater transparency. We can begin to read the lines of his own provident guidance in all the fabric of history, understanding how he has spoken a single word of love from beginning to end...first only glimpsed in bits and pieces, adjusted to the state of the people to whom he spoke (in all their limitation and blindness), and only little by little becoming more transparent, in a crescendo of radiance, until bursting forth into the world in the Incarnation of the Son as man, and in his Passion and Resurrection.

Considering these things, what is their import for the content of this book, for these reflections on Saint Joseph and what he reveals to us of God? The main points I have been leading up to may be surprising, but are of utmost import for the succeeding reflections. They are this: Christianity (and Catholicism in particular, being the God-given fullness of the Christian communion and life) distinguishes itself from all other religions in two particular ways:

1) Christianity is a religion, not so much of man's search for God, of human efforts to ascend to union with the divine, but of God's search for man, of the Trinity's passionate and loving pursuit of the human heart. It is the testament (in the fullest sense of the word: as *covenant*) of God's love seeking us. It is the manifestation in the world, the making-visible and making-real, of his activity in seeking (and saving!) his precious and beloved children, desiring tenderly to draw us back from the estrangement of sin and into intimacy with his own life of love. Christianity is precisely God's work to bring about the restoration of all that human sin has torn asunder; and it is indeed, in its heart, *the living-space of reunification*, where all of humanity, indeed the entire cosmos, is restored and made one within the heart of the Father through the redeeming work of Christ and the Spirit.

There is perhaps no better definition of the Church than the above sentence. Yes, this is the Church who is present in her fullness in the Catholic Church—subsisting in her completeness in all that God, in the redeeming gift of Christ, willed to give to us through her—but is also present, in differing degrees, in all places where Christian belief and life are fostered, and indeed anywhere authentic beauty, goodness, and truth are present. The Church, in a word, *is the living-space where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven*. The Church is *the space where all the division wrought by sin is overcome by Truth and Love, and human persons begin to live anew the love and communion, in the very likeness of the intimacy of the Trinity, for which they were created*.

I will continue with the second point in the next reflection.

DAY 4 GOD MADE MANIFEST (PART 2)

Let me pick up where I left off in the last reflection. I spoke of the true nature of Christianity as God's pursuit of us, indeed, his loving approach to us and his awesome gift of salvation and intimacy with himself. In this light, I indicated that the Church—even considering all the imperfections that exist within her and all the human foibles that threaten to obscure for us her authentic beauty—is the living-space where all the bonds of communion torn asunder by sin are overcome. She is the home in which God restores the intimacy that he intended with humanity in the beginning: the intimacy of each person with the Trinity and, in the love of the Trinity, true communion between human persons.

2. This leads to the second point. If Christianity is God's salvation, is Christ communicated to us perpetually until the end of time, then it is also of utmost importance to recognize that this salvation is not merely a spiritual reality, but also one fully *bodily*. Authentic redemption is not redemption *from* the world, but rather redemption *of* the world. All things, in Christ, are made new, and every single fragment of beauty, love, or goodness, every taste of intimacy or meaning in the world, is meant to live forever in God. And in Christ it truly does so; for in his Passion he gathers all together, raised up as he is like the divine Magnet and drawing all to himself (Jn 12:32), so that, in his Resurrection, in his definitive victory over sin, death, and all the forces of dissolution, he may introduce the whole universe into the unity and harmony of the inner life of God.

Here, precisely in the incarnate, bodily nature of true redemption, we can tie together the strands of this reflection and the last. How can we keep the transcendent mystery of the Trinity from remaining an abstract idea distant from life and experience? How can we allow his inner being and his external activity to harmonize together as a personal word of love addressed to us in the here and now, just as it also ties together all of history in a single fabric of his provident care? As important as the word is—the word of Scripture, of the Church's teaching and preaching and magisterium—this word is at the service of *the* Word. It is, in truth, nothing but this Word as made present to us in his illumining light, in his undying truth that is a light for our path and the destination, the home, of our restless hearts. This is the Word who is not an idea but a Person, the Incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ, who wants to join us to himself as “one spirit, one body” (1 Cor 6:17; cf. Mk 10:8), and to admit us, with him, into the intimacy of the Father's embrace, into the experience of the sweet kiss of the Spirit whom they share.

Thus, it is important to recognize that it is precisely in my body and through my body that God wants to approach me, to enter into intimacy with me...through the Body of Jesus Christ. As John Paul II wrote as the “thesis statement” of his *Theology of the Body*:

The body, in fact, and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it. (TOB 19.4)

It is not merely in ideas, in thoughts, or in acts of the will that God makes himself known or conforms me to himself (though this is certainly true as well!). It is also in concrete, bodily encounter, sanctified by the Sacraments which are God's tangible closeness to me (the "making-visible of the invisible"), and in all of my daily experiences made holy and beautiful as a fruit of this encounter. Yes, my body itself is a living-space of communion, a sacrament in its own right, which conditions my capacity to enter into relation with another. My body is a sacrament receiving the Sacraments; my body is a space of relation, a convergence-point, incorporated into the one mystical Body of the Church, and entering into communion with other bodies through the unifying power of the Eucharistic Body of Christ, the point in which all lines converge.

If this is true, then we can only fully understand the beauty of God's Love revealed to us, not by abstracting from history into the realm of ideas, but precisely by drawing near to history, to the unique and living bodies of those whom God has touched with his presence, and through whom and with whom he also wants to touch us. Here, immediately, it becomes apparent how these reflections lead us straight to Joseph and Mary, the two persons who were most directly involved, bodily and tangibly, in the Incarnation of God's Love in the world in Jesus Christ. By drawing near to them and seeking to feel with them the revelation of God's Love—to experience this mystery with them, by the co-experience made possible in the one Body of Christ in which we are all united—we can truly hope to enter into the very heart of the divine mystery of the Trinity that has become present at the heart of history.

DAY 5 HOLY FAMILY: SCHOOL OF FAITH

Everyone lives above all for love. The ability to love authentically, not great intellectual capacity, constitutes the deepest part of a personality. ... Authentic love leads us outside ourselves in affirming others, devoting oneself to the cause of man, to people, and above all, to God. Marriage makes sense, above all, if it gives one the opportunity for such love. (Karol Wojtyła, Letter of 1956)

There is certainly a place for abstract thought in Christianity; indeed it has been the cradle of so much profound thinking, just as it has been the cradle of the highest aspects of human culture. Nonetheless, in its essence Christianity is a religion that relies not just on the mind, but on the *heart* as well—the heart as the living core of the mind itself and as its highest exercise. Thus, most accurately, Christian revelation speaks most deeply and specifically to the spiritual core of the person—the “inner substance of the soul” as John of the Cross says—in which mind and heart converge together as one. Here I am one and indivisible in the core of my personhood, at the very seat of my “I,” and here all the experiences of my body, all the movements of my mind, all the choices of my will, and all the senses and affections of my spirit come to their root, to their center, reverberating in me and eliciting a response. Yes, here, in the echoing of God’s Word into me, my own word is awakened and set free, and the import of the Psalm is fulfilled: “Deep calls to deep” (42:7).

This profound place in the human person surpasses and relativizes the distance between the great and the small, the learned and the ignorant, to such a degree that Jesus can say: “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned, you have revealed them to little children” (Mt 11:25-26). We should try not to minimize the import of these words. The intimate knowledge of God does not depend fundamentally on intellectual acumen, but on purity of heart: “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God” (Mt 5:8). This is why the words of Scripture come not primarily as a philosophical or theological treatise (though these also appear to a greater or lesser degree within Scripture), but as a *story*. God reveals himself in a personal way precisely because he is a Person: actually, three Persons, united eternally in perfect love.

To welcome him, therefore, calls forth an attitude of poverty and humility that bows before the mystery in reverent awe, accepting in faith the approach of Another, who will always surpass human control and comprehension, even as awakening also a longing to understand the beauty of the Other as deeply as possible. And indeed, this very act of faith, spread out throughout life and permeating it, gradually allows God to *make himself known to the human heart* in a way that he alone can. God’s own self-communication to the human heart, his familiarity with their heart and theirs

with him, is precisely what gives birth to *wisdom*. “To know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (Jn 17:3). This is eternal life, and the knowledge of which Christ speaks is much more than intellectual while also not neglecting (but rather fully utilizing and elevating and sanctifying) the intellect. It is knowledge of the heart. It is personal acquaintance. It is intimacy. Somewhat like the intimacy with which a man knows a woman in conjugal union, or a woman knows the child in her womb or nursing at her breast...and yet so, so much more, in the virginal consummation that surpasses all things while also fulfilling them! It is the knowledge that we receive of Christ when his own Eucharistic Body lives inside of us, and of the Spirit as he begins to pervade our being with his breath, and of the Father as we relate to him more and more with childlike spontaneity as his beloved children, secure in his tenderness and his gaze.

It is the intimate knowledge that Saint Joseph learned over his lifetime of closeness to Mary and Jesus, through his humble and faith-filled acceptance of the mysterious approach of God and his guiding hand. Indeed, who in the whole history of the world is better fitted to introduce us to Christ and his Mother than Saint Joseph? He *knew* them, and he still knows them. He knew Mary in a more intimate way than any man ever knew a woman. He knew her as a husband knows his wife, though in a virginal way. Even more, he knew her as a brother, a friend. And most of all, he knew her as one child of God knows another, in that virginal core of all love that touches and reverences the inner mystery of the other person in the light of eternity. And he knew Christ, too, as a father knows his son, even as the Son transcended the father’s comprehension; he knew him as a man knows his God, and as a disciple his Teacher. Into the orbit of Joseph’s masculine love, the Son of God and his Mother were entrusted, and by living the richness of these relationships, he found himself being entrusted, to them, through them, and with them, into the all-surpassing mystery of the Trinity and into the fulfillment of all human communion in the heart of the Trinity’s embrace.

This is of utmost importance. Joseph was not merely a spectator, merely an observer. Nor was he merely a functionary, fulfilling a necessary role with disinterested obedience. No, he was a man, fully alive in flesh and blood, and drawn tenderly by the Father of all to be an icon of his own fatherhood in the world: to be a father to his Son, and to be a husband to his Bride. To be a chaste custodian of the mystery of virginal love and intimacy in this world. He is thus a true image for us of a mature faith and of authentic knowledge of God. He was not a scholar, not one of the righteous elites of his time. He was a man of silence of whom we have not a single recorded word. But his actions and his presence speak volumes. For everything about him speaks of intimacy with God and of intimacy with those entrusted to him by God. His is a heart against which one would wish to rest, a bosom into which one would wish to release one’s troubles, pains, desires, and fears. And I’m sure he received all of these from Jesus and Mary, having created, within the “masculine womb” of his own love and care, the home in which the Holy Family lived.

If we wish to be “schooled” in the most intimate ways of God, we would do well to draw near to the humble home of Nazareth, to sit down at table with Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. After all, where else in the history of the world have human intimacy and divine intimacy so deeply coincided? Where else has the communion of the Trinity—of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—so deeply pervaded and filled a human family that it becomes its transparent image and radiant icon—in father, Son, and mother? Yes, in the embrace of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, we see made visible before us, as it were, the face of God’s tenderness and the inner mystery of his uncreated love. Icon of the Father, Radiance of the Spirit, Incarnate Son. God made visible.

The humility of God is incredible. What kind of Father is he who chooses a weak and humble human being to be his representative, and entrusts into his care (his very faltering and imperfect care!) his own eternal Son, become a weak and defenseless child? What kind of Spirit is it who, being the eternal “womb” in whom the Son is begotten of the Father, makes himself so fully present in the heart and body of a young woman that the same Son is begotten in her, made flesh at the heart of time and drawing from her very body his own sustenance and life? And what kind of Son is he that, in order to draw near to the creatures who have turned away from their Creator, takes a human body and soul as his own, wedding himself to our humanity, so that he may impart to us a participation in his own sonship, and, through the mystery of adoption, may draw us back with him into the intimacy that he always shares with the Father in the kiss of the Holy Spirit?

DAY 6

GOD'S COVENANT OF LOVE IN HISTORY

We have plunged right in the deep end, haven't we? When I sat down to write these reflections, I did not know what would come, only that there was something important to say, waiting to unveil itself little by little. "The Lord is a lamp for my feet and a light for my path" (Ps 119:1-5). Beginning from the "top-down," I suspect we will come from the "bottom-up" soon enough. After all, I want to speak about the body, and about the beauty of human experience in the family, so that we can get up close to the warmth that emanates from that holiest of human families. Hopefully this proximity to such a warm and consoling hearth of love will bring us healing, light, and joy, particularly where we need it and yearn for it the most.

Where can we find a point of access to go deeper into this mystery? There are in fact a number of avenues through which I wish to enter, upon which I hope to reflect, in order to draw near to the burning furnace of love present at the heart of the Holy Family, and leading us back to the bosom of the Trinity itself. Let me outline them here, and then unfold them in following reflections.

1. I wish to speak of the union of *word* and *flesh*, which I have already hinted at a little above, in order to unfold how God's word in history is oriented towards the revelation of love and truth in the body, and how his covenant is sealed in the body, as it purifies and sanctifies our entire body-spirit existence to be in harmony with the Word and the Spirit. 2. This will lead us to the making-flesh of the Word himself, at the dawn of the New Covenant, and to the restoration of the sacramentality of the body brought to fruition in Christ's Incarnation and in the Redemption wrought by his Paschal Mystery. 3. Here we will be prepared to understand most intimately the beautiful nature of the love incarnate in the Holy Family, the love between Mary, Joseph, and the Child entrusted to their care. This is a love that is both marital and virginal, total and chaste, natural and supernatural. It is a love that harnesses the body totally as gift and yet in this very gift, virginally expressed, preserves and deepens the integrity of the person's belonging to God even as it joins persons together in mutual belonging. 4. In this light, we can begin to unfold, as much as we are able, the experience of Joseph as he stood before the mysteries of God playing out before him, mysteries that were sheltered, as it were, in the orbit of his humble and masculine love.

There is a lot of ground to cover, and I'm sure many other beautiful currents will surge to the surface as we make our way through this rich garden of God's self-revelation present in the life and love of the Holy Family, and particularly in the incredibly rich experience of the man, Joseph. As for the rest of this reflection, I would like to begin treating the first theme: the union of *word* and *flesh*. This is important because precisely in its light, also, we will be better able to understand the place of Joseph in God's plan, and the unexpected newness with which he was incorporated into the saving work of redemption in the world.

Let me start in the obvious place—the beginning—and yet tie in a per-

haps unexpected connection. At the beginning of time, in God's act of creation, the word became flesh: "And God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'" (Gen 1:26). What God *said* came to *be*. The loving pronouncement of the Trinity was made act, made external reality in the created universe. And this word in which God's creative love was manifest was not merely a passing voice, but the abiding *Logos* of God, the Son. As Saint Paul expresses it: "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:15-17).

Thus, for all time, God has willed that word and flesh come together, word and act in concrete manifestation. He said, and so it was. The same is true shortly after creation, in the first marriage covenant between Adam and Eve. They participate in God's word of love spoken to both of them, in which he gives himself to them, and also gives them, entrusts them, to one another. How? Of course, the primary thing is their own reciprocal gift back to the One who first gave himself to them. But this participation is also brought about by speaking their "yes" of love and self-gift to one another, man before woman and woman before man: "I am yours and you are mine." Their word of gift, which is later expressed in the vows of marriage, becomes more than just word: it is effective, a true gift of persons, joining their lives together in God. And this word becomes flesh also in the conjugal act, the gift of the body which seals and fulfills the word and makes it truly indissoluble as covenant. Finally, this word becomes flesh, by God's gift, in the conception and birth of a child. Every time a marriage is consummated, and every time a child is conceived, we can say with awe: the word is made flesh!

And it is precisely in this marvel—designed by God's infinite wisdom from the beginning—that God comes to meet humanity, and promises them the gift of renewal and life. The incarnation of word in flesh becomes the locus, the meeting-place, of God's covenant promises. First it was the conjugal union of Adam and Eve in their marital love and fruitfulness. Then, as this was ruptured by human infidelity and sin, it was gradually healed, deepened, and restored over a series of covenants throughout the Old Testament. It was made anew with Noah, after the flood, with Abraham the father of faith, and with Jacob, renamed Israel. It was renewed and expanded, and deepened immeasurably, with Moses, and then brought to a fullness in King David, looking forward to its definitive fulfillment in the son of David, the promised Messiah or Christ: the Savior who would come to establish a kingdom universal and without end.

In all of these, God has sought to renew (and in Christ fully brought about) the reality that human sin tore asunder at the beginning. He restored the original covenant, which, as I have indicated before, is understood precisely as a *familial* bond of love between persons, in which they are given to one another in mutual belonging—"I am yours and you are mine." Yes, this covenantal bond precisely establishes bonds of *flesh* where

none existed, precisely through the word that sanctifies and transforms flesh into gift.*

In all of these covenants, the bond was made in flesh, and on the basis of the word spoken in flesh and through flesh. This is why a covenant is ratified with a threefold act: 1) the *promise* or oath spoken between the parties (the *word* strictly speaking), 2) the sacrificial *gift*, which represents the commitment of one's very self (the flesh or its representation), 3) the *communion* shared by those who have entered into covenant with each other. For example, the covenant with Abraham is made by God's choice and word to Abraham, and his reciprocal "yes" to God, his faith, and is sealed in the gift of his own body through the sign of circumcision (the making-vulnerable of the very organ most distinctive of masculinity in spousehood and fatherhood). The same is true in the Israelite's covenant with God in the wilderness of Sinai, where they promise to be God's people as he promises to be their God, a commitment of their very bodies and lives to God manifest in sacrifice (see Exodus 24:8). And, at the climax of this mutual covenant gift: a meal of shared communion: "They beheld God, and ate and drank" (Ex 24:11).

In summary, we see how the coming-together of word and flesh lies at the core of the act of covenant-making. For it is precisely in our bodies—or rather in our whole being as embodied persons, in the inseparable union of body and spirit—that God wants to enter into intimacy with us, and to draw us into communion with one another. When word again becomes flesh, and flesh becomes word, the covenant has reached maturity, and love has found full expression.

This will be very important in the coming reflection, for when we come to the pages of the New Testament, we find something surprising. God fulfills this making-flesh of the word in a way that we would never have expected. All of his promises of descendants and lineage and a kingdom find fulfillment, not on the basis of the natural gift of the human body between man and woman, not through natural procreation. Rather, all of God's promises come to fulfillment in the virginal gift of a young woman's body directly to God, and through his own gift of love to her, which virginally impregnates her with the very Word of God-made-flesh. And standing before this mystery as its witness and custodian is Saint Joseph. He is asked, in his own chaste virginity, to accept the gift of the woman's body, and the gift of the body of the incarnate Word, such that his own life too becomes a word with their word, a word of intimate love in chaste belonging, singing together with them a harmonious "yes" to God, the Father of all.

*You can already glimpse how important all of this will be for understanding the gift of Christ himself, in the threefold manifestation of Incarnation, Paschal Mystery, and Eucharist. In all three his flesh is made gift as sealing of the word, and as establishment or consummation of covenantal intimacy: 1) Word made flesh in the womb of the Virgin, the eternal Word of God given wholly to us as man, as living and life-giving body; 2) the Body made gift on the wood of the Cross and rising from the tomb, establishing the true and everlasting covenant; 3) Body and Blood made gift and space of intimacy under the appearance of bread and wine, renewing and consummating ever anew the true marriage covenant.

DAY 7
THE COVENANT OF CONSUMMATION:
BODY MADE GIFT AND COMMUNION

In the last reflection I spoke about how God's work in history is oriented towards *the revelation of truth and love in the body* and, through this, *the sealing of the covenant in the body*. And this occurs precisely as the "word" is made "flesh," as the voice of gift, spoken in word, is made incarnate in act, in the gift of one's own being as an embodied person, to another. Adam and Eve were called upon to be such a gift to God and to one another, and they could have done so if they had accepted the gift that they first were from him, flowing forth from the tender generosity of the Father. Indeed, in the gift of their very existence, their very embodiment, they also received the gift of the Father himself, the communication of the Trinity's life sealed upon them, living within them, and enfolding them. But they refused to live according to the inner meaning of this gift, to abide within the space in which God constituted them in love—a space that, in truth, would have been nothing but the radiant freedom and lightheartedness of play and the consummate joy of intimacy in mutual belonging.

The spirit of evil, manifest to them in the sanctuary of the garden, insinuated a lie and doubt into their hearts and minds. What was this lie, and what was this doubt? It was an attack on the very *goodness of the Father*, on his tender and affirming presence to his children and his desire for their well-being. The evil one portrayed God, not as he truly is—as love, generosity, care, closeness—but as a distant taskmaster, a harsh and uncaring lawgiver. "Did God really tell you not to eat of *any* of the trees of the garden?" (Gen 3:1). "Why, if he really loved you, would he place such limits upon you, would he ask you to hold back from the good things that he has given?" What a deception! For God did not speak such a word. No, rather he gave *everything* freely into the hands of his beloved children, for them to receive, cherish, and love as he himself loves all that he has made. The only condition he placed upon them was to avoid evil and the disordered clinging that betrays the gift, to resist "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," which represents the pursuit of false autonomy apart from the enfolding tenderness of God's love, and the spirit of self-centered possessiveness.

Yes, God's primal gift did not call for sacrifice and self-renunciation, for death or suffering, for the constricting of the heart; it called only for love's openness and expansion. It called only for complete reciprocal gift of self to the Giver of all, for the word of love and truth incarnate in the flesh and the flesh sanctified by this word. For our first parents had *everything* freely from God's hands, and they possessed it in the perfect purity and transparency of love, in the joyful non-possession of primal poverty, in the sweet tenderness and security of primal chastity, and in the grateful receptivity in unbounded trust of primal obedience. But as Eve turned her gaze away from God's boundless gift, and, at the insinuation of the tempter, directed

her gaze at the tree of knowledge of good and evil, she began to see a different way to live: “And she saw that the fruit of the tree (Gen 3:6). The tree represents the direct opposite of the three primal dispositions of love—obedience, poverty, and chastity—in what the Church’s tradition calls the “threefold concupiscence,” the threefold lust: lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. This is the desire to pursue pleasure, as an intoxicating flight, apart from its home in the bosom of love and affirming relationship. This is the desire to possess as one’s own, as “mine,” apart from the “you” of the other, thus setting “mine” and “thine” apart, when in the beginning they were meant to coexist in the joyful “ours” of love. This is the desire to be the sole dictator of one’s own life, as an autonomous individual dependent on no one, rather than letting all unfold in the true security of being God’s beloved child, seen, known, and cherished, and led by him hand in hand along the paths marked out by his love, from love unto love, from solitude unto the joy of communion.

Here, in sin, solitude no longer blossoms forth, in gift, into the joy of intimacy. Here the solitude of the heart, innately open to receive and to give love, to be a living locus of relationship between “I” and “you” incarnate in the body, sunders such bonds, severs such relationship, and becomes a whirlpool of grasping and a fortress of self-defense. Here is the rupture of human desire, originally rightly ordered and born from the inner heart of each person, blossoming outward freely in response to the awesome gift of God manifest in each moment. Now the heart collapses in upon itself and the faculties and experiences of the human person are fractured, ruptured, and shattered in a thousand pieces. The openness of communication between God and his children is collapsed, and the original harmony between man and woman is fraught with tension, shame, and misunderstanding; and indeed the relation between man and woman and the whole of creation loses its transparent purity and beauty, becoming opaque and filled with strife, misunderstanding, and a lack of the harmony that God originally intended.

This is what happened to God’s original plan of manifesting love in the body, of sealing his covenant with man and woman in the body. All three primal relationships of Adam and Eve were wounded to their very core: the childlike and spousal relation to God, their fraternal, friendship, and spousal relation to one another, and the openness and transparency of their capacity for parenthood. And in all of this, not only is the human spirit dimmed, dulled in its thought, desire, and insight, as a shadow falls over the human faculties of mind, will, and affectivity. In addition to this, a shadow falls over the human body itself, as embodiment of the unique person. Whereas before, in the nakedness of the other, the radiant beauty of their incomparable person was seen, received, and cherished with tenderness in the light of God’s own affirming gaze, now the body is seen as an object to be used, possessed, and discarded. Or, at the best, it has become an enigma, struggling to speak a word that is now jumbled and unclear, even as its beauty in all of its parts can never cease to speak and to call out for the restoration of what it has lost.

Love revealed in the body? The covenant of communion sealed in the gift of the body? Now the image of God's love in human life and flesh is threatened with becoming an anti-image. The pristine beauty of his Word in which they were created, seeking to be manifest in and through them, borders on becoming an anti-word, a place of estrangement and strife rather than a sanctuary of intimacy and love. And man and woman, however hard they try, cannot fully restore what they have lost. It does not lie within our power to restore our own wounded nature, to gather together the pieces that have been scattered. But God himself does not abandon his unfaithful children. Rather, he promises to redeem, heal, and save them by his own loving intervention in history. As he says to the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed. You shall strike at his heel, but he will crush your head" (Gen 3:15).

And thus begins the line of covenants leading up to the definitive covenant, to the full restoration brought about in Jesus Christ, the Seed of the woman who crushes the head of the serpent in the gift of his own Body on the Cross and in the Eucharist. Here is the new tree, the tree of life that heals all wounds inflicted at the foot of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And here stands a woman, the bride and mother, virginal as Eve was virginal, welcoming the gift of the man in purity and openness. Here both abide together, Jesus and Mary, Man and Woman, in the vulnerability and openness of chaste love and total self-gift. Here they live love's true nature, and they do so because they fully accept the primal gift that makes them to be who they are: the gift of the Father's all perfect love. And within this encircling love of the Father of all, they pronounce their "yes" to his goodness, his plans, and his invitation to eternal intimacy...a "yes" which rights all the "no's" of humanity's sinful history, and opens a space for all of us to draw near and to pronounce our own "yes" too.

WEEK II

Approaching Joseph's Mystery

DAY 8 IN THE ORBIT OF A MAN'S LOVE

Our reflections have led us to the dawn of the New Covenant. There are, of course, many events and themes that have not even been touched upon in the passage of history from the promise God made to our first parents in the Garden of Eden to the Redemption brought about in Christ. There is so much richness hidden in the pages of the Old Testament, in the covenants God made with his chosen people in preparation for the definitive covenant given in his beloved Son. But these can be found in many other writings, and I myself have treated of a number of such themes elsewhere; I would like, therefore, to begin to home in on our subject more directly. About time, right? The groundwork we have laid so far, however, will hopefully prove its fruitfulness as we step into the light of the New Testament and turn our gaze to God's work in the fullness of time.

As Saint Paul writes: "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir" (Gal 4:4-7). Here we see the dawn of the New Covenant. In the Son of God made man, men are made sons of God. The eternal Son of the Father became the son of Mary, a human being, so that we, in him and through him, might become partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4), might share in the very life of God. This is the "great exchange," the mutual self-giving and breathtakingly intimate communion established through the Christian covenant. Here the Word is made flesh, and flesh is made a partaker in the Word:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. ... But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. (Jn 1:1-3, 12-14)

And this astounding, world-changing event takes place in such a humble and hidden way. The infinite and eternal God makes himself small, he descends and "reduces" himself down to an infinitesimal point, smaller than the tip of a needle: as an infant conceived and growing in the womb. Thus begins the final stage of his movement of redeeming love, of tender compassion, by which he draws near to us, sanctifying our very flesh and everything that is ours. He will come so close to us that he becomes a partaker even in our suffering and death, and then, given wholly in love, will

be ever near to us in the tiniest crumb of bread or drop of wine, in which is contained the infinite fullness of the divine Trinity, and the gift of his total love for us.

Yes, his passageway into this world is the narrowest of doors, and yet, in truth, the most expansive. For to truly get as close to us as he desires to be, to meet us in the place where we need him the most, he must make himself small, hidden, and humble. And such humility is not in fact foreign to him, for his eternal love is always humble, in the true greatness that is nothing but gift and intimacy, turning all our ideas of human greatness, success, and fame on their head. And so he comes, as an infant in the Incarnation, as a suffering man in the Crucifixion, as a man victorious over suffering and death in the Resurrection, and as Love freely communicated, as the body-made-communion, in the Eucharist. He comes like a divine syringe, a tiny point of utterly focused love, in order to pierce into the wound of humanity's flesh, and, in the poverty of his openness, to let God's Love pour forth in and through him to touch us, pervade us, and bring us healing and new life.

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Joseph [was] the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ. ... Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to send her away quietly. But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus. (Matthew 1:16, 18-25)

How soberly and humbly Matthew recounts the incredible miracle of the Incarnation! "Before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit... 'for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.'" A virginal conception, without the intervention of any man: a marvel that presents itself to Joseph's mind and heart. On learning of her pregnancy, Joseph must have been filled with such confusion, uncertain of how to proceed, or even of how to make sense of what was happening. But God intervened to show him the path he wished him to walk, to invite him, not to pull away from the great mystery unfolding before him, but rather to draw near to it. Indeed, he heard the word, "do not fear to take Mary your wife," do not fear to receive and shelter her, and that which is conceived in her, within the orbit of your own love and care.

Here we see laid before us a beautiful trait of masculine love, of authen-

tic male tenderness, reflecting the tenderness of the heavenly Father himself. It is this: to be a safe shelter for the weak, vulnerable, and little. If God has made himself little, the weakest of the weak, then he is not thereby left alone. Rather, his weakness is but the flip side of a deep openness to communion; it is the vulnerability of love calling forth love in response. And Joseph, even without fully understanding, accepts the word of God given to him by the angel, and “makes it flesh” in the action of his life. He takes Mary into his own home, and creates, thereby, a space where the most sacred mysteries of God can unfold in a sanctuary fitting to their holiness. He becomes a custodian of life: of the life of Mary and the life of the God-man conceived in her womb. As John Paul said in a homily on Saint Joseph:

Fatherhood is responsibility for life: for the life first conceived in the woman’s womb and then born, in order that a new man, who is blood of your blood and flesh of your flesh, may be revealed. God who says: “do not abandon the woman, your wife,” says at the same time: “receive the life conceived in her!” Just as he said to Joseph of Nazareth, although Joseph was not the blood father of him who was conceived of the Holy Spirit in the Virgin Mary.

This is part of what it means to be a man, is it not? To be one who gives all that he is to reverence the sacred mystery entrusted into his care, a sacred mystery of life and love. A man, a husband, is called upon to reverence the sacred body of woman, his wife, to veil her holy mystery in love and humility, even before passing beyond the veil of her flesh as he becomes, in his body, a gift to her. So too a priest is called upon to enfold and care for the sacred mysteries of God in the word and the sacraments, and in God’s very activity in human hearts; and he does this first of all with the disposition of his heart, with his very being, made “eucharistic” in the Eucharist he reveres, made a pure gift of contemplative love and sacred being, before he does it in ministerial action. In him, just as in the natural husband and father, word and flesh become one, the love of the heart and the very being of the man who loves.

Man is a husband and a father, all born from being, first of all and before all, a beloved son. He is a little one, sheltered in his own right by the perfect Father, and knowing in this pure love of God true security and rest, true peace in his identity and in the intimacy that is the foundation of his life. And from this place, and only from this place, he finds the capacity to open wide his being, body and soul, to be a welcoming-space for others, a space of sheltering tenderness and affirming gift.

DAY 9 THE CHURCH IN MINIATURE

“The essence and role of the family are in the final analysis specified by love. Hence the family has the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love, and this is a living reflection of and a real sharing in God’s love for humanity and the love of Christ the Lord for the Church his bride.” This being the case, it is in the Holy Family, the original “Church in miniature (*Ecclesia domestica*),” that every Christian family must be reflected. (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Custos*, n. 7)

We have at last begun to unveil something of the beauty of Saint Joseph, even though our path here was rather “round about.” I hope that this approach is working for you, and is beginning to unseal, in some small way, the “unfathomable riches of Christ” (Eph 3:8) and the incredible depth of beauty and intimacy that lies hidden within the gift of the Gospel planted like a seed within our world. I am doing what I can, and trusting that what comes naturally is the best thing. I trust that what wells up from the silence is truly an echo of that silent Word who became flesh two-thousand years ago, died and rose from the dead, and who lives forever in his Church, pervading the whole universe with his presence and the echo of his voice. Let us then try to continue on the path that is becoming visible before us, to follow the current of grace pulsing through the arteries of the great mystery.

I spoke in the previous reflection of the nature of true masculinity, particularly in relation to the man’s call to care for the *little*, as well as his capacity to reverence what is *sacred*. To the degree that he is not corrupted by the paradigm of worldliness or by the blindness of concupiscence, man is spontaneously drawn to these things: drawn to the vulnerability of the little and drawn to the attractiveness of sacred beauty. He finds himself organically drawn out, extended beyond himself, in order to become gift and receptivity before the reality that approaches him, the reality entrusted to him. Man has a unique capacity, for example, to reverence and affirm the beauty of woman, in both her spirit and her body. He is sensitized by God himself to resonate with the unique nuances of divine beauty as manifested in her, to receive and understand this word that God speaks through her, and to love, cherish, uphold, and protect her in God and for God. The same is true, indeed, in man’s approach to all things of beauty, to all the glimmers of God’s sacredness manifest in created reality, whether in nature, art, music, culture, or society.

But at the same time, due to the grievous wound of original sin, man has a unique capacity to *wound* the very realities he has been ordained to shelter. We need think only of the mirror-image opposites presented by our hurting secular society: pornography, sexual slavery, rape, casual sex, distant fathers who do not protect wife or child; disregard for nature, a businesslike attitude that sees only numbers, only roles, and not unique per-

sons, a prideful irreverence for everything that invites man to recognize his own littleness or to bow before what is greater than himself, the disinclination of men to commit their lives to Christ in the way that so many women do. The danger in all of this is that the Church will become an emasculated community, one in which our pews are filled almost exclusively with women, and our homes are burdened by absent fathers, or fathers whose presence is seen as oppressive, for it is not marked by tenderness, gentleness, and true listening.

How can healing begin in the Church and in the world, a healing so deeply needed, for the wound is so grievous? Saint Joseph can show us the way, the way back to the Heart of the masculine Christ. He can do so in a way that complements and deepens the way that Mary, his wife, also leads us to Christ. Both of them together can offer us a tremendous education in true masculinity and femininity, in the true approach to God which harmonizes men and women in a single mystery of love and intimacy. It is often emphasized, for example, how Christ, as a man, truly looked like his mother. He had her genetics, after all, with no admixture of the genetics of an earthly father. But he also looked like her in his mannerisms, his dispositions, his way of acting and relating. Yet it is also true that Jesus looked like his father Joseph, not genetically, but in a way that, by looking at Jesus, we could come to know his foster father as well, and by contemplating Joseph, we can come to know more about how Christ lived and experienced his existence as a man within this world. After all, his prime earthly example of masculinity, of what it means to be a man, was Saint Joseph.

What humility there is in Christ, that, looking at him, we can say both, “Hey, you’re Joseph’s boy!” and, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!” In order for this correspondence to be full and true, God prepared Saint Joseph in advance, he rendered his heart transparent, so that he could relate to the incarnate Son as an icon of the heavenly Father, and educate him, as man, in the ways of sonship and masculinity. Being the divine Word made flesh, Christ knew from the first dawning of his human consciousness that he was the beloved Son of the heavenly Father. I spoke of this in my book on entrustment to Mary. But this did not hinder him from relating to, and learning from, his earthly father, Joseph. Rather, in his experience (just as with his mother, Mary), Christ harmonized both experiences within the single consciousness of the Son of God: human intimacy and divine intimacy, being a son of man and being the Son of God, living the concrete unfolding of human life in this world and living the inmost mystery of the Trinity’s life of beatific joy.

And since this is true, it means that precisely the incarnate Son—precisely Jesus Christ at the heart of the Holy Family—is the connection point where this earthly, human family is made a living icon of the eternal Trinity. The Son draws the line from heaven to earth; he unites the two within his own divine-human embrace. And surrounding him in love, in intimate communion with him, Mary and Joseph abide, experiencing the presence of the Spirit and of the Father pervading them. Thus the home of Nazareth becomes a sanctuary saturated with the sacred, a temple totally permeated

by the Trinity. It becomes, in a real way, the living image of the Church, in a communion of persons united in love after the very likeness of the Trinity, before the Church herself is fully manifest in the world at Pentecost. We can call the Holy Family, therefore, the “Church in miniature,” or the “Church in seed.” It is the first family of believers, the first home in which human hearts are united on the basis of their shared closeness to Jesus Christ, and, in him, in their participation in the inner life of the Trinity.

DAY 10
FROM BEGETTING TO BEGOTTEN

I would like to begin today a series of reflections on the beginnings of the Holy Family in Scripture, so that our reflections can always remain totally rooted in God's revealed Word, in his incarnate activity in history, and may unfold this profound reality more deeply.

Matthew 1:16. *And Jacob fathered Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, called Christ.*

It is truly a marvelous thing that the Savior of the world comes at the end of a long line of promise and fulfillment, prepared by God for centuries in advance. But it is even more marvelous that this Savior is not a mere man, a great human being who has been "touched" and "chosen" by God, but remains merely human; what is most marvelous, rather, is that this Savior is *God himself made man, God living as a human being in our midst*. And the verbs used in the text unveil this to us: *egenesen* (fathered) becomes *egenethe* (was born). The active verb becomes passive, implying an activity far deeper: the activity of God, before which the human person can only acquiesce in faith, hope, and love. Here active begetting becomes receptive birthing, origin from man blessed by God becomes origin directly from God entrusted to man. From the focus on the man and his begetting capacity, there is a shift, subtle and yet all-important, to the conceiving and bearing potency of woman, and to man's care for the mystery alive in her: from Jacob fathered (*egenesen*) Joseph, we come to Joseph being the husband of Mary, of whom was born (*egenethe*) Jesus, called the Christ.

In other words, in the midst of this human "fathering," at the climax of the genealogy of Jesus, there occurs a subtle and yet all-important shift: "And Jacob fathered Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, called Christ" (1:16). Here the line of begetting, the line marked by the initiative of man, the human male, ceases, and instead a birth begins in a wholly other way: a birth from a woman who is untouched by man, and yet entrusted to a man (Joseph) who is called to shelter this child conceived of her chastely from God. In place of the man, the husband, now stands God; and in place of God stand the man, Joseph, as the representative of his paternity and the custodian of his Son. What a marvelous interchange! *O admirabile commercium!* Here human and divine things are interchanged, drawn so close together that they abide in a ceaseless circulation, like heart and arteries, in a ceaseless respiration, like breath within and air without.

God is here, in the conception and birth of Jesus Christ, the Father. God is the Begetter. God is the source of the life and being of Christ, the Anointed One, the Savior of the world. And the birth of his Son through Mary, and entrusted to Joseph, in fact brings to fulfillment the deepest meaning of both masculinity and femininity, revealing their innermost meaning as incarnations, expressions of the life of God himself as Father,

Son, and Spirit, as Begetter, Begotten, and Womb-of-Love. The Holy Family is, thus, a living icon of the Trinity, a human reflection of the hidden life of God. Though he does not stand at the origin of Christ's existence, Joseph is nonetheless a true father, the true husband of Mary and father of Jesus, albeit in a virginal way that does not spring from conjugal (sexual) union with Mary nor from his begetting of her child. Indeed, in the relationships of the Holy Family, all is made virginal, in anticipation of the love of eternity, the love that awaits all of us at the end of time, in which temporal sexual expression will pass away while gender finds its consummation in the virginal embrace of the Triune (Three-in-One) God.

And the masculinity of Saint Joseph is a beautiful and necessary medicine for the sickness of our contemporary world, particularly in the areas of manhood and fatherhood. Without the slightest trace of machismo or unhealthy self-assertion, without a touch of violence or force, Joseph enters into the space of greatest sacredness, the sanctuary of holiness. And he does so not to make himself known, to extend his own ego or to prove himself, but to simply offer himself in loving service and tender sheltering of the mystery that comes from God: the mystery of the woman and of the child. "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). The man comes into his own, not merely as the doer and achiever, as the breadwinner, but as custodian of the holiness that his heart has a particular capacity to feel, to see, and to reverence. It is his gift and task, as man—as a beloved son of God who is also, from this space of his own belovedness, called to be husband and father and friend—it is his gift and task to be the representative of God's tenderness and the channel of his care.

How deeply needed is this medicine today! How far we are from true manhood, with so many men begetting children whom they abandon, and so many men with a gaze corrupted by lust in our pornified culture, seeing women not as a sacred mystery—each woman as a sister entrusted into the care of her brother—but as an object of sexual desire, exploited through the power that man supposes to have over her, but in which, in fact, he loses himself and becomes the slave to his own disorder. And ultimately, this is because we are far from standing in the light of the gaze of the true Father, the Creator of heaven and earth and the Cherisher of each human heart! May he find us in our waywardness, in which as a society we have set him aside and marked out a path for ourselves far from his face. May he come and lift us up, drawing us back from our sin and stupidity and revealing to us anew the precious communion that we have lost, Father and child, Bridegroom and bride.

How refreshing it is to see, in this respect, the true God-centered masculinity of Saint Joseph. How refreshing it is to see the chaste receptivity of Joseph, that as man he is capable of seeing, of being sensitive with a listening heart, a heart silent and pure that looks only to cherish, to care, and to protect. Regardless of the fact that so many in our society, and in fact throughout history, have despaired of any man being capable of authentically loving with tenderness, without any trace of violence or control or manipulation (or apathy and indifference on the other hand), Saint

Joseph's silent presence tells us again and again what man truly is. He, as belonging to God, is the custodian of the mysteries of God. He is the brother into whose care the mystery of woman is entrusted. He is the father into whose protection, education, and love the child is placed. He is the priest into whose hands God himself is surrendered as bread and wine, as Body and Blood, as forgiveness and truth and new life and healing anointing. Yes, the whole world, indeed, is given to man, not to dominate and control for the purposes of his own supposed power.

Rather, he is invited to stand before all in the disposition of total powerlessness, the powerlessness and vulnerability of love—that precisely thus, lifting all up in hands wounded and heart pierced, he may offer all back to God whole and entire, in resurrection and life, in the gift of his own self: “This is my body, this is my blood, given for you.” The true life of man is eucharistic, joined to the Eucharist of Christ, the true Man, and manifesting the love of the heavenly Father himself. He lives the truth inscribed in his being not when he achieves and creates by mere force of the will, or when he dominates over others, but whenever his whole being, body and spirit, is made a gift to God and to others in the passion of love, made a eucharist in union with the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. Flowing from the sanctuary of belovedness, a son within the Son, beloved within the Beloved—and never departing from this place—he finds the strength, the true power, to walk the path of vulnerable love to the very end, unto the total gift of cherishing tenderness for God's little ones, for God's sacred mysteries entrusted into his care, and into the fullness of intimacy with the Trinity and with every person, in this life and the next.

DAY II
THE MARVEL OF CONCEPTION

Matthew 1:18. *Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows. While his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before their coming together, she was found to bear a child in her womb by the Holy Spirit.*

The Greek language can be so rich in expression, so visceral and incarnate, that it can be startling to read the flesh-and-blood words of Scripture after our much more conceptual way of speaking in our current world. For example, the phrase for pregnant in this text is *en gastri ekousa*, literally translated “in her womb having.” Our word “pregnant” does not at all convey the same depth of feeling, does it, though it means the same thing? “I have a child in my womb!” the pregnant woman wants to cry, from the heart of her own experience and all that it entails. The child is something—someone—so intimately present, at first unfelt except in the affection of the heart, and then so vividly tangible that it is impossible to ignore. All that is at first known is that man and woman “came-together” (another word we’ll speak about in a moment) and then that the woman’s monthly period has stopped. At first so small, but communicating so much: the gift has been given and the gift has been received; no longer then is the woman’s body awaiting the gift that makes her fruitful, rather, she is now harnessed in sheltering and nourishing the new life conceived in her. This is the ordinary course of events.

The woman’s body stands in readiness, her womb, her *gastri*, is empty, not with hollowness but with receptivity to life and love. And then, after the gift meets her receptivity, her womb is filled: *in gastri ekousa*, in her womb she is found to be bearing, to be bearing a sacred mystery and an unrepeatable life. But in the case of Mary, the mother of Jesus, things occurred differently. She was found to be bearing a child in her womb *before* she and Joseph came together, before any act occurred that could generate new human life in this womb...that is, any act except that referred to by the terse and yet significant words, “by the Holy Spirit,” *ek pneumatos hagiou*. “Before they came together, Mary was found to be with child in her womb by the Holy Spirit.” The phrase for coming-together here is *sunelthein autous*, literally meaning “came together themselves,” or “brought themselves together.” It is a compound of *syn-* and *elthein*, with *autous* referring to the persons, Joseph and Mary, who are being brought together. It makes one think of other words: synod, synergy, synergistic. It implies a flowing together of two persons, two energies, into a single life.

This phrase refers not just to the sexual act, however, but also to particularities of Jewish practice. For the state of marriage in which Mary and Joseph were when she conceived was the *betrothal*, a time in which promises had been made but the fullness of marital union had not yet been fulfilled. It was a time in which the betrothed couple lived separately, awaiting the marriage feast in which the husband would take his wife to live with him in

his own home, which he prepared for her. It was thus, so to speak, a pre-marriage marriage, and provided the perfect place for God to accomplish in Mary his wondrous plans of the incarnation of his Son. For she was entrusted into the care of a man, Joseph, who would protect and care not only for her (and for the mystery of her virginity), in the chastity that God had fashioned in him, but also for the child to be born of her. It may go without saying, but we'll mention it here, that the "before" in this passage —i.e. "before they came together" does not imply that they had intercourse afterwards (the Church teaches Mary's perpetual virginity, and this alone does full justice to the inner harmony of the mystery). It refers rather precisely to what we said: that the conception takes place in this "pre-marital" engagement state and also before any sexual act has occurred, and thus it can only be precisely what it claims to be, namely, "of the Holy Spirit."

Let us return to the passage and to the significance of the words: "before they came together Mary was found to be with child in her womb by the Holy Spirit." The language that Matthew employs is significant. He is explicitly putting Joseph's begetting capacity side by side with that of the Holy Spirit, in effect saying, "not this, but this," in other words, "not a natural human begetting, but the begetting effected by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit" (to use Luke's phrase, cf. Lk 1:35). Here the synergy of two beings, the coming-together of two persons, is not man and woman, but woman and the Holy Spirit, who enters into her and commingles his own being and activity with hers, thus bringing to conception within her the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Yes, the coming-together of man and woman is replaced, here, by the coming-together of God and woman, by the kiss and marriage, in the singular person and experience of the Virgin Mary, of God and humanity.

Here we see present in seed all the richness of the meaning of Mary's virginity and her motherhood. As daughter of the heavenly Father, she is capable, in the purity of heart that springs from the security of belovedness, to offer her own body as spouse to the gift of God, in virginal and nuptial receptivity. And as the fruit of this coming-together, this meeting of God's gift and her receptivity, there is a kiss of human and divine, a primal intimacy of body and spirit that is an example and a hope for all humanity: spousal communion with God. But obviously this is not the only fruit; the fruit is also, as we are so used to thinking and saying, "the blessed fruit of your womb, Jesus." Mary, through her virginal spousehood, through offering her whole sexual and maternal capacity directly to God, conceives the very Son of God in her womb, and becomes the mother of God.

And this makes the statement we paused on previously even more amazing: not only is Mary found to "be bearing in the womb," but she is found to *be bearing God himself!* She is found to be with child in her womb of the Holy Spirit, and this child is none other than the Son who is begotten in the bliss of eternity from the bosom of the Father by the power of the same Holy Spirit. What happens for all eternity in the innermost mystery of the Trinity's life has now extended itself outward, in gift and vulnerability, to become flesh in time and space: the Son is begotten of the Father in

the joy of eternity, now the Son is begotten, as a human being, in the sanctuary of the Virgin Mary's flesh. Thus she becomes "God's little heaven," the temple of his presence and the ark of his covenant. The infinite and eternal God, boundless in power and wisdom and encompassing the entire universe in the womb of his love, deigns to become fully present, a mere dot, and yet full of overflowing life, in the womb of Mary.

DAY 12 A JUST MAN

Matthew 1:19. *Now Joseph her husband, being a just man and not wishing to disgrace her, decided to divorce her secretly.*

Israel was a society in which marital chastity was highly valued, understood as it was in the light of God's own love for his people, whom he had chosen, cherished, and cared for as a bridegroom his bride. Whenever they, as a people, had turned from the face of God and sinned, he spoke of this sin as marital infidelity, as adultery: "You grew exceedingly beautiful, and came to regal estate. And your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through the splendor which I had bestowed upon you, says the Lord GOD. But you trusted in your beauty, and played the harlot because of your renown, and lavished your harlotries on any passer-by" (Ez 16:13-15). Indeed, even the painful years of their purification were understood in this light, as the casting away of an unfaithful bride who is then, in the loving fidelity of her Husband, welcomed back anew with forgiveness and mercy:

Fear not, for you will not be ashamed; be not confounded, for you will not be put to shame; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. For the LORD has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God. For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the LORD, your Redeemer. (Is 54:4-8)

Now Joseph, as a chaste man, as a "just man" devoted to the law of God and his righteousness, is faced with a similar situation. His betrothed has been found with child apart from him, before their coming-together in wedded union. And he is conflicted. The law of the Old Covenant says that one is to condemn and stone a woman who is found to have committed adultery against her husband. Is Joseph then to condemn Mary in fidelity to the law? After all, for the Jews righteousness lay precisely in obedience to the law. How could Joseph go against it? But really, what does the law call for in such a case, what does God, for whom the law speaks, ask for in such a situation? For Joseph stands before a mystery that defies expectation and does not fit into the ordinary categories: he stands before a unique situation that requires a unique response.

It is hard to imagine that Joseph would truly suspect Mary of adultery, considering the fact that they were wed, entrusted to one another by God himself and bound by the vows of the covenant. How would he not know of her immaculate purity, indeed, of her personal commitment to maintain

her virginity throughout her life in devotion to God? For even in the old law it seems that provision was made for a woman to vow her virginity to God and for her husband to respect and affirm it (see Numbers 30). He must therefore have known of Mary's intentions, and have had every intention himself to respect this gift. After all, he was prepared beforehand by God to be precisely the chaste custodian of Mary's virginal mystery, just as Mary had been prepared to be the virginal mother of God.

But neither of them would have expected what actually happened: the conception of a child through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. Their devotion to God, their self-offering to him in chastity and virginity—a disposition formed in both of them such that their marital belonging was the context, for each, of a deeper belonging to God—was but the space for God to work his immeasurable miracles of redeeming grace. As John Paul II writes, the union of Mary and Joseph was both fully virginal and fully marital, a kind of super-fulfillment of marriage in the realm of virginity, of total belonging to God that surpasses the temporal ways of sexual union and procreation and yet precisely thus opens the way to an intimacy and a fruitfulness that far surpass it: "*The marriage of Mary with Joseph...conceals within itself, at the same time, the mystery of the perfect communion of persons, of Man and Woman in the conjugal covenant and at the same time the mystery of this singular 'continence for the kingdom of heaven': a continence that served the most perfect 'fruitfulness of the Holy Spirit' in the history of salvation. Indeed...it was in some way the absolute fullness of that spiritual fruitfulness, because precisely in...Mary and Joseph's covenant in marriage and continence, the gift of the Incarnation of the Eternal Word was realized*" (TOB 75:3).

Imagine yourself in Joseph's situation and facing his dilemma. He has vowed himself to this woman, Mary, whom he loves in chastity as a sister placed within his care and into the orbit of his love, and also enfolds and intends to protect in a love that is spousal, though lifted up into virginity. And she, too, has entrusted herself to his care, and placed the protection of her virginity into his embrace, that he might keep her safe and hidden in God in the sacredness of her devotion. And then he learns that she is with child. What is he to think? He knows of her purity; he knows of her intentions (how could he not?); and yet here she is, pregnant. Did he think her guilty of adultery, or perhaps the victim of rape? It seems that Mary would have told him otherwise, considering that so many of the struggles in marriage and relationship spring precisely from a failure in communication, a failure to speak in trust and to listen in authentic receptivity. Yes, it is difficult to think of the chaste communion of Mary and Joseph as anything other than a living-space of complete mutual transparency and trust. How could she expect him to protect her if she refused him this most vulnerable and intimate fact of her encounter with the angel and the nature of her conception? The dilemma, therefore, lies elsewhere than in suspicion of infidelity. But where?

Assuming then that Mary spoke to Joseph of her encounter with the angel—as recounted in Luke—and of the conception by the power of the

Holy Spirit, why is he overcome with fear that leads him to intend to divorce her quietly? Here we come to the real test of Joseph's justice, his righteousness. What does it mean for Joseph to be faithful to God in such a situation? Is a mere adherence to the letter of the law adequate? But what if the situation, in its unique contours, does not fit into the letter of the law, but calls for a singular response? He could take Mary as his wife and raise the child as his own; but this would expose Mary to shame since it would be obvious that the child was conceived before they came to live together, and thus was (as supposed) a fruit of infidelity either with Joseph himself or with another man. Divorcing her openly, on the other hand, would expose her to even deeper shame. So divorcing her quietly, secretly, seems the best way of protecting her, while also stepping back from involvement in what has happened to her. But it seems that Joseph is facing a fear still deeper. For he is facing a reality more profound than just shame born of misunderstanding; he is facing a reality that calls for, and requires, his total and intimate involvement.

As a text from 2 Samuel recounts of the ark of the covenant being brought up by king David to Jerusalem, "Who am I that the ark of the Lord should come to me?" (cf. 2 Sam 6:9). David, overcome by the immeasurable holiness of the ark that bears God's presence among his people, declines to receive it into his house, and instead diverts it into the house of another (the house of Obed-edom). But after seeing that God abundantly blessed Obed-edom, whose home shelters and accommodates him, David changes his mind and indeed receives the ark of the Lord fully. The parallel seems obvious. Is Joseph going to divert Mary away, before whose holiness he stands in awe, in a false sense of humility, in a fear of his unworthiness? Indeed, overcome by the unexpected activity of God, with his inexplicable and yet obvious work in Mary, Joseph intends to do so: to divorce her secretly.

Here his own fidelity to the law is stretched beyond its limits, invited into the super-abundant fulfillment possible only by grace, by openness to the "surpassing" that is so characteristic of the fullness of the Gospel: "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:20). Joseph stands on the cusp of this transition, from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, from the heart of Israel's expectation of her Messiah to the conscious acceptance of him into one's heart and home. And he balks in fear and uncertainty. Shall the righteousness of a man of the covenant, a man faithful to the law entrusted to Israel, remain enclosed in its own sphere, or shall it open itself to the newness that fulfills the law while also surpassing it, the newness that is none other than the abundant revelation of the Trinity's love incarnate in Jesus Christ, son of Mary, son of Joseph, Son of God?

DAY 13
HE COMES IN MY DREAMS

Matthew 1:20. *While he was thinking on these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to receive Mary as your wife, for the child in her has been conceived by the Holy Spirit."*

Our previous reflection has led us to the heart of the decision facing Joseph: it concerns the transition from being a just man of the Old Covenant to being a just man of the New Covenant. There is a continuity between the two, but also a discontinuity, a step that can only be taken by grace, by God's own activity. Saint Paul understood and expressed this well when he wrote: "Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not; for if a law had been given which could make alive, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the scripture consigned all things to sin, that what was promised to faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal 3:21-27). And further: "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir" (Gal 4:4-7).

Joseph faces precisely this transition, standing before the utter newness of God's activity in the Virgin Mary, who has been entrusted into his care. Where he stands now, on the basis of his own righteousness, his own ability and strength and justice, he is not capable of adequately sheltering her and the mystery alive in her. No, it is too great, too beautiful, too brilliant for him. To step into the fullness that God intends for him, he must allow himself to be expanded, dilated, to be the custodian of a mystery that surpasses him, to orbit, encircle, and protect the One, indeed, who encircles and upholds the entire universe.

Fidelity to the God of the universe who has chosen to make his dwelling in Israel, who has chosen them from all peoples on the face of the earth to be his own, now reaches its fullest realization: the law finds its fulfillment in God's definitive marriage with his people in Jesus Christ. And Joseph experiences in his own person this transition from the betrothal of the Old Testament to the definitive marriage of the New Testament. He experiences the transition from the justice of the law to the "righteousness through faith" (cf. Rom 1:17).

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. For Joseph in fact cannot make

this transition on his own; God must intervene and carry him where he himself cannot go, in the process eliciting and liberating Joseph's own freedom in the fullest measure, Joseph's own docile acceptance and courageous cooperation. And so: "While he was thinking on these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to receive Mary as your wife, for the child in her has been conceived by the Holy Spirit'" (Mt 1:20).

"Do not be afraid!" This is the cry at the heart of the Gospel. This is the cry voiced so many times by Jesus Christ himself throughout his life, and spoken by his Spirit, throughout time, into the heart of each one of us. We see that Joseph was indeed acting out of fear, hesitating before the mystery entrusted to him, and intending to turn away from it. But God does not wish it, and directly intervenes through the angel. "Do not be afraid!" he says. "It is I myself who am acting here, in the conception of Mary, and in choosing you—Joseph—to be the custodian of her mystery and of the child alive within her, this child who is my own Son, the Messiah and Savior for which you have all been waiting." Yes, these words indicate something precious and profound: God himself has chosen Joseph to be the one to care for the mother and the child. And it is on this choice, and the bestowal of grace that it bears, that Joseph can place his trust, and find the courage to walk.

In other words, what is revealed to Joseph is the mystery of *entrustment*. God has entrusted into the orbit of Joseph's love the most sacred of his mysteries, his virgin mother-bride, and also his very Son, incarnate as a child. But in receiving this entrustment, Joseph is invited to entrust himself to God anew, and more deeply, so as to walk in faith-filled surrender into the mystery that is at work in him and around him. In a word, receiving entrustment calls for the deeper entrustment of oneself to God; only the latter entrustment has the space to adequately receive and shelter the former. But what more can we say about this entrustment? Indeed, John Paul II has some phenomenal words on the subject, which I have quoted multiple times in other writings, but which it is necessary to revisit here.

Can one man say to another, "God has given you to me"? As a young priest, I once heard my spiritual director say to me: "Perhaps God wills to give that person to you." These were words of encouragement, urging me to trust God and accept the gift one person becomes for another. I suspect it didn't immediately dawn on me that these words also hide a profound truth about God, man, and the world. The world, the very world in which we live, the human world...is the setting of an ongoing exchange of gifts—gifts given and received in many different ways. People live not only alongside one another, but also in manifold relationships. They live for each other; relating to one another, they are brothers and sisters, wives and husbands, friends, teachers, students. . . . It may seem that there is nothing extraordinary in this; it is just the normal pattern of human life. In certain places, this pattern intensifies, and it is there, at those points of "intensification," that this gift of one per-

son for another becomes most real. When two people join with one another, not only do they give themselves to each other, but God also gives them to one another. In this, God's creative plan is enacted. (*A Meditation on Givenness*, n. 1)

Entrustment is the "gifting" of one person to another, which elicits the reciprocal gift in response. It is rooted in the loving intentions of God for two persons, and manifested according to his unique plan, with all the specific contours that the persons, through mutual discernment, discover that he wills for them and for their communion in him. This is exactly the process in which Joseph and Mary are now engaged. How are we to live this gift of mutual entrustment that God intends for us, both in regard to one another and to the child conceived in Mary's womb? The angel's message to Joseph marks out the way, drawing beyond fear into a full acceptance of this entrustment and all that it entails, into a full sharing of life in virginal-marital communion, into the sacred space of home in which the incarnate Jesus shall grow and flourish as man, and indeed in which the Trinity's love shall be reflected and manifested more than any other place in history.

DAY 14
THE MYSTERY OF ENTRUSTMENT

John Paul speaks of the entrustment of Mary to Saint Joseph, and expands it to be a unique word of invitation to each one of us, to every man who lives. We are *all* invited to open our hearts to this mystery of entrustment, and to be ready to receive and care for those persons entrusted to us, just as Mary and Jesus were entrusted into the care of Joseph:

I think that every man, whatever his station in life or his life's vocation, must at some point hear those words which Joseph of Nazareth once heard: "Do not be afraid to take Mary to yourself" (Mt 1:20). "Do not be afraid to take" means *do everything to recognize that gift which she is for you*. Fear only one thing: that you try to appropriate that gift. That is what you should fear. As long as she remains a gift from God himself to you, you can safely rejoice in all that she is as that gift. What is more, you ought even to do everything you can to recognize that gift, to show her how unique a treasure she is. Every man is unique. Uniqueness is not a limitation, but a window into the depths. Perhaps God wills that it be you who is the one who tells her of her inestimable worth and special beauty. If that is the case, do not be afraid of your predilection. Loving predilection is, or at least can be, participation in that eternal predilection which God had in man whom he had created. If you have grounds to fear that your predilection might become a destructive force, don't fear it in a prejudicial way. The fruits themselves will show whether your predilection is for the good.

It suffices to look at all the women who appear with Christ, starting with Mary Magdalene and the Samaritan woman, then the sisters of Lazarus, and culminating with the Most Holy Virgin, who was blessed among all women (cf. Lk 1:42). You must never be prejudiced about the meaning of God's gift. Just pray in all humility that you may know how to be your sister's keeper, so that within the orbit of your manhood she might find her way to her vocation and sanctity... Acknowledging this, the Church repeats after the Song of Songs: "Behold how beautiful you are, my beloved." (*Ibid.*, n. 5)

This beautiful entrustment is always reciprocal, not necessarily in the sense that we are equally cared for by the person for whom we care (as there are as many different nuances and degrees of reciprocity as there are relationships, though all love as it grows in maturity grows in reciprocity and mutual care), but in the sense that *receiving the entrustment of another summons forth in us a deeper need to entrust ourselves to another*. Having received Mary and Jesus entrusted to him, Joseph found the need to entrust himself still more totally and radically to God, so as to be the custodian of the mysteries of God. Indeed Joseph, in receiving Mary entrusted

to him, also entrusted himself to her; and both together, man and woman, entrusted themselves to God. This is the true and full reciprocity of human intimacy reflecting and sharing in the intimacy of the Trinity. John Paul concludes his reflection precisely with this: with the need for us to entrust ourselves to Mary herself, and through her to God, that we may truly learn the meaning of entrustment, of love, and may live it with complete chastity and transparency of heart. His words are beautiful and elicit deep pondering:

I was aware that my vocation to the priesthood would put many people in my path, and that God would entrust each one of them in some special way to me: giving them to me and tasking me with them. It was then that the great need of Marian entrustment was born within me—that need which is encapsulated in the call: *Totus Tuus*. These words, first and foremost, are not so much a declaration as a plea that I do not succumb to any [disordered] desire, however subtly camouflaged. They are a prayer that I remain pure, and thus transparent to God and to men. I pray that my vision, hearing, and intellect remain pure. *Totus Tuus*: they all should be at the service of revealing the beauty God has given to man.

I recall a quote from Norwid's poem, "Chopin's Piano":

I was with you in those penultimate days
of uncomprehended threads
Complete as a myth,
Pale as dawn,
When life's end whispered to its beginning:
I will not play recklessly with you, no!
I will only hold you up!

I will not play recklessly . . . not touse . . . not ruin . . . not belittle . . . but raise up, praise, magnify . . . *Totus Tuus*. All yours. Yes. We must ourselves be a total gift, a disinterested, sincere gift in order to recognize, in every man, the gift that he is, and to thank the Giver for the gift of the human person. (*Ibid.*, n. 5)

To receive entrustment we must be entrusted. Joseph, to be the custodian of the mystery entrusted to him, needed to be so surrendered to God as to be possessed by his mystery and at its service. So too a priest, to be the custodian of God's mysteries in the sacraments, in the word, and in the hearts of God's children, feels the deep need to belong ever more totally to God, so as to be possessed and permeated by him, and to be transparent to his light. For every one of us this is so. The high point of love does not consist in any particular act or any particular words, but precisely in the *surrender of the heart*, in entrustment, first of all to God beyond all things, in the virginal faith of the heart, and then, in God and with God, to all who are entrusted to us and placed within the orbit of our love. In order to receive entrustment, we need to be entrusted first, ourselves, to another. In order to love generously and in mature donation of self, we must first repose in gratuitous intimacy and peaceful security in the embrace of God. Only

from this space can we find the freedom to authentically open our being as a sheltering space for others, as a home for vulnerable hearts, and to truly be a gift, a eucharist, to them and for them in the likeness of the Eucharistic and Paschal Christ.

WEEK III

Faith and Entrustment

DAY 15

ENTRUSTING THE GREATEST MYSTERY

I hope it is apparent how, even though my previous words—and those of John Paul II—have been focused on the reality of masculinity, women too are invited to share in this same mystery of loving entrustment. That should be quite obvious, indeed, and a cause for wonder and contemplation. Both man and woman, in all the richness of their complementarity, are nonetheless invited to live the same indivisible mystery of love and intimacy. For all love in this world springs from, manifests, and returns to the love of the Trinity, and the love of the Trinity contains in itself, in supereminent fullness, the beauty of both masculinity and femininity. Woman too, after all, opens herself to be a welcoming-space of sheltering tenderness, entrusted to another and welcoming those entrusted to her, and also giving herself in response.

We see this again in the Holy Family, do we not? Joseph, entrusted to God as a “just man” (Mt 1:19), is able to welcome Mary who is entrusted to his care, and the child, too, who is growing within her body. And Mary, for her part, entrusted both to God *and* to Saint Joseph, is able to receive, shelter, and care for the Son himself, who has been entrusted to her in utter littleness, weakness, and humility. She is able to offer him a home in her feminine tenderness and love, just as she has found a home in the masculine love of Joseph, and in the abundant love of the heavenly Father. Both forms of love, both dimensions of intimacy—human and divine—intersect and flow into one another in the beautiful life of the family of Nazareth. What is lived in the heart in prayer, in unmediated communion with the eternal God, is also manifested, in flesh and blood, in human love and relationship. And what unfolds in human relationship, in family life, is rooted in and flows back into communion with God himself.

At the heart of this intersection of human and divine intimacy, we can see the authentic beauty of manhood and womanhood, originally fractured by sin, at last restored. In the communion of Mary and Joseph, the true reciprocity of man and woman in God is made radiant and pure again. And this paves the way for such restoration to permeate history, to permeate our own lives, making them radiant with the light that first shines forth from the heart of the Holy Family. After all, this communion that existed between man and woman, Joseph and Mary, also manifested uniquely, later, in the communion between the mature Christ and his Mother, and then, after the former’s death on the Cross, in the intimacy between the beloved disciple, John, and Mary who was entrusted into his care, as he was entrusted into hers.

In this regard, I would like to share a poem/reflection that I wrote a number of years ago, treating of the profound beauty of masculinity and femininity in their mutual entrustment in the light of God:

You entrusted your greatest mystery, my God,

the incarnation of your beloved Son within our world,
 into the care of a woman, daughter, bride, and mother,
 and yet this woman you entrusted
 into the orbit of a man's sheltering love.

In the mystery of the Annunciation,
 this pure and spotless virgin, consecrated to you,
 was nonetheless also betrothed to a husband,
 who would take her to himself,
 not to consummate with her an earthly marriage,
 but to shelter the mystery of her virginity,
 her sacredness, and the One alive within her,
 while not fearing to love her deeply and wholeheartedly
 with the virginal ardor that surpasses, in its depth and purity,
 any earthly love rooted merely in the earth.

The same is true of the birth of your holy Church,
 the Bride and Body of Christ, to be perpetuated
 throughout the ages and until the end of time,
 incarnate in the same woman, standing at the Cross.
 Here you entrusted yourself entirely to her anew
 in the gift of your love pouring out
 from the opened Heart of the Crucified One;
 and yet here this woman, receiving the greatest gift,
 was again entrusted into the orbit of a man to shelter her,
 the beloved disciple, to reverence the mystery alive in her,
 and to reverence her in her mystery, alive in you.

Yes, woman was created to be the locus
 of your greatest miracles within the visible creation,
 and yet the woman was meant to be sheltered
 by the enfolding love of the man, caring for her.
 And in this way the woman is free, safe and secure,
 to be who you created her to be in your plan,
 to flower like a blossom opening in the sun
 within the shelter of the masculine mystery
 in which her femininity flowers freely.

And yet the man, too, needs the woman
 to be who you, my God, created him to be,
 for the woman's presence, her beauty,
 unseals within him potentialities recumbent
 until they are touched and drawn forth by her,
 as a gift of enfolding and sheltering love,
 a gift of sacrificial outpouring, freely given,
 so that the woman may freely be what you made her to be.

I would like to share another poem, one longer and more in depth, as
 tomorrow's reflection. But for now let me simply conclude these words for
 today by saying the following. In the interrelationship of man and woman,
 we see unfolded before our gaze a living icon of the mutual relationships of

the Persons of the Trinity. This is the way that God himself “designed” masculinity and femininity, such that the reciprocity between the two is an image of the reciprocity of the divine Persons. This is true both of the spiritual complementarity of man and woman, as well as of their rich physical complementarity, which incarnates and expresses the deeper complementarity of the heart. In the reciprocal acceptance and gift between man and woman—in which man gives and woman receives, and woman gives and man receives, and both become a space of welcome and gift for the other, sharing in a single intimacy in which “I” and “You” become “We”—we have a most vivid created icon of the inner life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

DAY 16
A REFLECTION ON MARY'S ENTRUSTMENT

In order to unfold in a greater richness the insights unveiled in previous reflections, allow me to share another poem. This one, too, seeks to gaze into the beautiful icon of Trinitarian love as manifested in the reciprocal relation of masculinity and femininity. It seeks, in particular, to see how love, for both man and woman, is healed and restored through the relationships that unfold at the heart of the Gospel: between Jesus Christ and those most intimately joined to him, and between Mary and those into whose care, during her earthly journey, she was entrusted (Joseph, Jesus, and John).

I.

All the things that you have made, my God,
are unspeakably beautiful, each in their own way,
reflecting the splendor that is yours eternally,
refracted and made visible in the midst of time
and filtered out in many different colors
in the multiplicity and breadth of space.

Yours is the glory of the mountains,
reaching out to the heavens with strength,
arising above the earth, magnificent,
and yet also creating a nestling place
not only for the creatures of the world
but for the light and warmth and rain of heaven,
cradled in the bosom of the earth.

And yours is the grandeur of the sea,
tranquil and deep, peaceful and yet strong,
reflecting on her silvered-over face
the face of heaven stretching over her.
Through the face the depth is shared:
a dance of mutual communication
between the heights of heaven, surpassing,
and the depths of the ocean, surpassing too.

Yours are all the creatures in their multitude,
each reflecting you, my God, and revealing your face,
speaking a "word" from you which,
however partial or imperfect it may be,
nonetheless directs the receptive heart
to the fullness from which all has been born
and into which, at the end, all will return.

II.

But when you came to us, my God, in fullness,
 unveiling for us your glory for us to behold,
 you did not come in the glory of nature,
 in the mountains or sea or multitude of creatures,
 nor even did you come into the grandeur of humanity
 with all its achievements and feats of glory,
 which claim to manifest through their greatness
 the greatness of God himself.

No, my God, when you came,
 you came into the most intimate place
 and the most radiantly beautiful,
 teaching us anew to look for beauty
 where it can authentically be found:
 not in the heights of human greatness or achievement,
 not in what sparkles before human eyes,
 not in what makes man feel great before God,
 but rather in the utter humility of human littleness
 which is great precisely thus, because the heart feels,
 in its littleness, truly great, because gazed upon with love
 by the greatness of the Infinite and Eternal One.

Yes, you came, my God, you came...
 into the heart and the body of woman,
 the most precious of all your creatures,
 and the abiding home of your greatest works,
 which occur hidden within her who is sacred,
 veiled over with the reverence of your own creative touch,
 and yet made manifest at the right time, humble yet true,
 in the ceaseless miracle of your Love at work in human flesh.

My soul magnifies the Lord,
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
 for he has looked with favor on his lowly handmaid.
 Behold, from this day all generations will call me blessed,
 for the Almighty has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
 He has mercy on those who fear him
 in every generation.
 He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
 and has lifted up the lowly.

III.

You came, my God, you came
 not into a sanctuary made by human hands,
 but into the virginal flesh of Mary,

and you knit together flesh for your beloved Son
 out of the sinews of her own flesh,
 working in her by the overshadowing of the Spirit,
 who is the maternal breath and tender touch
 and the space of the divine paternal begetting,
 by which the Virgin became Mother
 without knowing the touch of man.

And this most sacred mystery,
 the woman who represents the whole creation,
 gathers every fiber of the whole world
 and makes all one within her own heart and body,
 offering it as a welcoming space, a bridal chamber,
 a womb of love and tenderness, for God himself.
 And God comes, God comes—into human flesh!
 He takes flesh as his own, as Man,
 within the sacred chamber of a Woman's flesh.

These are holy mysteries, deserving of silent awe,
 of the ardent contemplation in which,
 beyond words, the heart surges with grateful love.
 And yet these mysteries, so holy, so virginal,
 are not for this reason inaccessible, far away.
 Rather, they are unspeakably near,
 as this sacred chamber of virginal love
 lives in the heart and body of every woman,
 and as every woman is the tabernacle of God
 entrusted into the care of every man.

Saint Joseph, you heard this word first, for all of us:
 “Do not be afraid to take Mary into your home.”
 The same is said to each one of us,
 into the orbit of whose love, my God,
 you yearn to entrust the mystery of woman,
 beloved daughter, virgin-bride, God-bearer.
 And how can we receive—how can I receive—
 more deeply, than by receiving as Joseph did?

Yes, for he took Mary to himself,
 enfolding her in the shelter of his home, his love,
 caring for her in every need of body and spirit,
 in the most intimate mutual belonging.
 And yet the sanctuary of her virginity,
 given to God, and by God's presence, sanctified,
 he never entered, except with the tenderness
 of his veiling and sheltering love,
 which did not need to touch in that way,

but desired rather to hold for God, and in God,
 until the final consummation would come
 in which all marriages would be consummated
 in the single Marriage that makes all one.

IV.

And this entrustment lived by Joseph,
 even within the confines of this fallen world,
 was not less intimate, but rather more,
 for he was allowed into the inner sanctuary,
 not by being the one who himself gives and begets,
 but rather by being asked, representing the Father,
 to shelter that which, by God, had been begotten.

And so he did, with humility and reverent awe,
 being drawn into the most intimate space
 in which he could witness the most sacred mysteries,
 which he was asked to enfold and protect
 even as, first of all, they enfolded and protected him.

God did not hold back, did not veil,
 the sacredness of his work from Joseph,
 but he asked, instead, that Joseph veil himself,
 that he enter into virginity too, to love the Virgin
 and the Virgin-Child born of her.
 And in doing this, a whole new realm of intimacy
 opened out before him, and within his heart,
 in which he already tasted the mystery of eternity
 in the home that he created in Nazareth.

For he was close to Jesus and Mary,
 not on the basis of the natural categories of love,
 passing away as they are, at the end of time,
 but in the very light of eternity,
 in the enfolding embrace of the Trinity,
 such that his communion with Mother and Child
 was a living participation, in this world,
 in the intimacy of Father, Spirit, and Son.
 And it found its fulfillment when,
 there in the divine embrace,
 they were again united, each with the other,
 after all the veils of this life were at last torn
 and gave way to the ecstasy of eternal consummation.

DAY 17
ENTRUSTMENT AND ENCOURAGEMENT

Matthew 1:24-25. *Then rising up from sleep, Joseph did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him, and received his wife. And he did not know her before she bore a son, and he called his name Jesus.*

These few words provide perhaps the deepest and most intimate glimpse into the heart of our spiritual father, Saint Joseph. A man of silence, of reverence, of humility, we have no words of his recorded in Scripture. But this silence itself speaks immensely. In his place of greatest vulnerability and defenselessness—in his sleep—the angel of God has come to him and has spoken to him. And the words of the angel are an *entrustment* and an *encouragement*, two acts which the masculine heart deeply needs and desires in order to be set free to love profoundly and authentically: an entrustment of Mary and the child into his care, and an encouragement to not be afraid to love them deeply and ardently, and to let the whole of his manly being enfold, protect, and expend itself in sheltering and caring for them. This is what comes from the angel. What comes from Joseph in response reveals the nature of his heart: having received this entrustment and encouragement he *springs into action* immediately, without the complications and delays that come from pride or fear. He does not stand at a distance—which was his first response, born of hesitation and uncertainty before the mystery alive in Mary—but rather draws near and encircles in his love, because he himself knows that he is first encircled in the love of God.

The prompt, joyful, and spontaneous obedience of Joseph reveals the purity of his heart, and the placid transparency of his soul: like a tranquil lake reflecting the light of the sun that shines upon it. Beforehand he was uncertain, not because of selfishness or resistance to grace, but simply because of natural confusion and the limits of human comprehension, because the way of God had not yet been made known to him. But once this way becomes clear (and not on the basis of his own natural foreknowledge or intelligence but as a gift descending upon his restful heart awaiting God), he sets out upon it with vigorous readiness and docile surrender. He sets out upon it with a lively faith. Truly, he is a just man.

We see here how the obedience of Joseph is beautifully interwoven with his chastity and his poverty of spirit; he is so docile to God's direction, to the inspiration of the Spirit through the angel, because his heart is *free*, his heart is *free to love*. Unmarred by lust or the need to possess Mary for himself, unhindered by clinging to control over his own life or manner of operating, he is able to let his life be swept up into the embrace of God and his divine activity. He is able to walk in the great "unknown" of grace, the path that God alone knows and that forever surprises the human heart that walks upon it. And yet this unknown is not something terrifying or fear in-

ducing—not, that is, to the heart that comes to know who God truly is. Yes, as we draw near in spirit to the relationship of mother, child, and foster-father, we can feel a sweet and beautiful atmosphere exhale upon us. The atmosphere of this family, the heartbeat of this obedience, is not a rigid uptightness, a fearful scrupulosity, but a breadth of heart, an expansiveness of spirit—born of radical trust and total surrender—that allows them to relax and play at every step of the journey, whatever it may hold.

Yes, true poverty is not constricted, miserly, and fearful; it is not merely thrifty, merely frugal. It is, rather, prolific, generous, and carefree. So too authentic chastity is not repressed, not contained by mere force of will or intellectual decision; it is, rather, born of a deeper seeing of the heart, which has wedded itself to the higher value of purity and to the way of loving and being present that is made possible by such purity. Finally, evangelical obedience is not a submission of oneself to a superior power, a more mighty will; it is, rather, simply a loving, filial, and confident trust in Love and all that Love desires for our welfare and for the welfare of all. It is a wholehearted and simple acceptance of the immense love in the heart of the heavenly Father, and of the way in which this love marks out the path of life, in the best and most beautiful way, for each one of his children.

In all of this, we see that Joseph—as Mary too—is a truly “righteous person,” not merely in a legal adherence to the law of Israel, but in the deepest and most authentic evangelical sense. He is one of the true *remnant of Israel*, of which the prophets spoke. He is one of the poor, the *anawim*, who, having learned the deepest lessons of salvation history, have come to stand before God in the disposition of complete open-handedness, in radical vulnerability of heart, awaiting the salvation that can only come from him, and ready to respond to it with vigorous and generous hearts.

DAY 18
THE TRUE BOLDNESS OF FAITH

Allow me now to follow a path of reflection which unfolds at this point, which shall lead (supposedly) away from our focus, only to return to it more deeply and intimately. I speak of this, also, because it is so essential to our times, and to the healing of the Church today, as well as to the radiant transparency of her witness in the world. Above I mentioned that the faith of Saint Joseph was not constricted or fearful, but expansive in trust and playfulness, and precisely because of this he was able to follow God with vigorous readiness. How beautiful this is, and how important! This Josephite faith is precisely what our world needs so deeply; or to speak more accurately, this faith as exemplified by the Holy Family, by Mary and Joseph together with their Child, Jesus Christ, in the intimate home of Nazareth, is the key to allowing the Church's witness, evangelization, and mystery to be tangible and intelligible in the world of the twenty-first century and into the future.

We live in a society that is obsessed with the question of personal happiness and well-being. And there is nothing wrong with the desire for happiness; indeed, God made us in precisely that way, and this longing is the spark that kindles the fire of *eros* that carries us all the way back to the embrace of the Trinity in unending bliss! But it is also true that this desire, in a relativistic society, cannot achieve true liberation. For only in the truth am I free; only in the truth am I happy, for my longing for happiness is precisely my longing for truth. A desire for happiness closed in upon the isolated self becomes a mere desire for good feelings, for pleasure, and such a desire ceases to be liberating and instead becomes enslaving. One look at the advertisements that throw themselves before us everywhere we turn reveals this; one look at our indulgences, our habits, and the things that we, as a culture, value, impresses this upon us. Having severed ourselves from our origin in God, and from the guidance that his presence and truth gives to our life, and also from the existential meaning of what it means to be a creature, to be human in the midst of the world, we have replaced this instead with a materialism that arises from the roots of atheistic existentialism—the belief that faith in God is dead and that henceforth we are our own god, the determiner of the nature of reality and the arbiter of our own destiny.

And yet in practice this no longer looks like the “heroic” audacity of the founders of atheistic existentialism (such as Nietzsche and Sartre, and even Kant and Descartes), willing to look into the abyss of absurdity, confronting the despair of meaninglessness, and choosing instead either to create meaning from within themselves or to accept the despair with stoic indifference. No, rather, in practice it often simply looks like individualistic hedonism or pragmatism, the pursuit of pleasure, power, and possession, with little or no reference to objective truth or moral reality. These, after

all, are thought to be relative, up to the “value-preferences” of each individual person. What is really real is not objective truth, and certainly not some universal moral law binding all individuals equally; rather, what is real is only my self (though I don’t say it to myself in so many words). All else is uncertain; all else is beyond my ability. I should tolerate others just as they tolerate me. They have their happiness and I have mine. They have their rights and I have mine. Let us simply not interfere with each other, tolerating each other’s opinions and beliefs, our own preferences.

But, of course, the aspiration towards moral nobility and goodness still lies within us, implanted in us as it is by God himself, and essential to our nature as human beings. We still feel within us the impulse to self-transcendence, to the movement from “I” to “You,” from isolation into the “We” of community. But without its foundation in an objective truth that is equally and universally binding on all, which is the living-space in which all can meet and encounter, this movement out experiences so many frustrations in its very expression. Relativistic as so much of our society is, the spark of altruism that says that we should all work together for common goals that all agree are good comes up again an insurmountable limit. These goals, not being rooted in a deeper time-transcending reality, tend to be those “pet” goals of our contemporary society, those common denominators that all people wouldn’t dare disagree with, like relief for the poorer countries, the rights of minorities, particularly sexual or gender minorities, and a well-ordered and materially affluent society, world peace. In fact once objective truth has been dismissed, and criterion which are equally binding on all and from which persons can deviate—being, thus in error—there is very little or no stable ground on which we can “work together” for the common good. Though it may not appear so immediately, little by little the frailty of the ground of “mutual tolerance” will show itself, and, without a common pursuit of objective, universal truth, our tolerance, our cooperation, will degenerate into mutual use—I benefiting from you and you benefiting from me, and yet neither of us serving a reality beyond ourselves. As it is said, it takes three to love: you, me, and the reality in which we both find our home, and which unites us. You, me, and the Trinity.

After this, we can return to the nature of true faith, as exemplified by Saint Joseph and our Blessed Mother. Faith is not a merely personal, “private” consolation (Marx’s “opium of the masses”), a flight into a subjectivism of the emotions in which we pat ourselves on the back with religious truisms and worship a God of our own imaginings because facing the naked truth of the world is too scary. Of course, this too is a temptation for the fallen human heart; yet it is not true faith, but its corruption. Real faith, particularly in its most mature expression, in its fullness as Christian, Catholic faith, is a living contact with the Reality of all realities; and as such, it is true consolation, born not of self-medication with particular “religious truths,” but of a living, personal contact with the God who sees, knows, and loves all of reality and each one of his children, and who is the solid foundation of all truth, revealing it to us in the revelation of himself. Yes, it is union, in the vulnerability and powerlessness of true acceptance

and surrender, in personal relationship, with the God who is Truth, Goodness, and Beauty itself.

Faith is thus also stepping beyond our own sight, comprehension, and control in order to entrust our lives into the care of the One who loves us. And in this, it is buoyed up by the certainty that what we ourselves cannot yet see and comprehend is fully known by God, transparent to his gaze, and that his very seeing marks out the path for us. And as we walk from our own narrow and dim seeing into the space of his seeing, his seeing of us and of the living space of communion and life into which he calls us, we too come to see, in him and through him and with him. Yes, precisely in walking in trust in the seeing of God, faith unlocks the possibility of deeper seeing, of more intimate knowing, of unmediated contact with realities that were invisible to us before, not because they are hidden, but because our hearts could not see, because we did not have the eyes to see.

Faith's discernment of choices in life, both big and small, indeed lies in the ever-deepening capacity to follow the voice of Love in the heart—this Love-that-sees, and, in seeing, begets light and clarity—and, through this following, to come ourselves to see. And the choice to follow is always, to a greater or lesser degree, experienced as a “leap,” as a step into the unknown. This is because faith—joined to hope and love—is always an expansion outward, a reaching out beyond myself to God, a movement from “I” to “You,” like Peter walking on the water to come to Jesus and Joseph responding to the call of the angel. At first, in the incipient movements of faith, whether the primal act of belief in God and in Christ or in a particular “shift” in the growth of faith or life—in ever-renewed conversion and a deepened commitment to the fullness of sanctity that calls for *all* of us—there is always a space of hesitation, of doubt, in which one can move either back into the security of the “known,” or the “already-experienced,” or can move forward into the alluring mystery of the unknown (yet deeply Known) which nonetheless speaks of something even more solid, even more secure, even more certain. And as this step is made, as one grows in the walking and begins to truly inhabit the new space opened up by faith, what beforehand was obscure, unknown, and fear-inducing, becomes peace-filled and radiant clarity. For now the heart knows, through direct faith-contact, through the vivid experience of living intimacy, the reality which before it could only intuit from a distance, and whose voice it heard echoing across the this distance, inviting nearer.

DAY 19
CERTAINTY COMES IN THE LIVING

The above insights about faith and freedom, about playfulness and expansiveness of heart, also greatly illuminate the true nature of the so-called “discernment of spirits,” in other words, the process of distinguishing the different forces at work in human life, so as to hear and respond to the voice of God, and not the voice of the fallen, disordered desires within us nor to the voices of the spirits of evil. Without at all disagreeing with or disparaging the traditional methods—for example Saint Ignatius’ *Rules for the Discernment of Spirits*—it is important to point out that, at the end of the day, discernment is meant to be a very simple matter and not a perpetually complicated affair (it is often fear that makes it complicated, or the unredeemed desires within us that blind our vision). For the path of faith leads from the periphery to the center, from multiplicity to unity, from complexity to simplicity, from long and drawn out considerations to the spontaneous seeing of the heart. And little by little, by living in the atmosphere of faith, one becomes acquainted to the sound of God’s voice, sensitized to the presence and the voice of Christ: “I know my own and my own know me,” he says, “as the Father knows me and I know the Father. I call them and they follow me, for they know my voice” (cf. Jn 10:1-18).

Our fractured desires, obscure idealizations, and dulling fears little by little release, and, by the activity of grace within us, become integrated with the deeper “voice of the heart,” the voice of our own innermost being as God has created and redeemed it. And this voice of the heart is the place in which we respond most freely and fully to the voice of Christ—it is the sanctuary of our “yes” to his own “Yes” of love to us, by which he calls us to himself and to the fullness of life. True certainty, after all, neither needs nor desires long and drawn out considerations, a multiplicity of arguments, or reliance on “proofs” to bolster itself.* Though these can be important in the beginning—after all, the Christian, Catholic faith is profoundly convincing even and also on this level, on the level of reason’s questioning and pursuit of truth—a mature faith-contact with God and his truth is suprarational, it is unmediated fullness felt with the heart and overflowing into one’s whole being. This cannot be reduced merely to arguments and expla-

*John Henry Newman wrote profoundly of the process of coming to certainty as an “accumulation of probabilities,” in other words, the gradual coming together of innumerable proofs, numerous threads that all point in the same direction and lead to one unescapable conclusion. G.K. Chesterton spoke of this, too, when he said that a man is truly certain of something, not when a few arguments convince him of it, but when *everything* convinces him of it. Little by little, as one lives in contact with the rich tapestry of life with an ardent desire for the truth, particularly religious truth, one begins to read the lines of the face of Christ inscribed in all reality, and all threads coming together to make up a world marked by the creative action of the Trinity’s love and directing our hearts to our eternal destiny in the heart of his embrace.

nations, nor adequately expressed in speech, and leaves one stuttering on contact with the Mystery: the “I-don’t-know-what behind their stammering” of Saint John of the Cross. God’s fullness is just *there*, and his truth is so alive, so viscerally real for the person who has surrendered to it in faith, that no doubt is any longer possible. It becomes the really real, the truth that illumines the whole of reality in its light, so close now that it cannot be held at arms length, objectified and analyzed, but only surrendered to ever more deeply and intimately, and thus known and felt more fully.

Let us come full circle now. It is beautiful to see how all of this leads us again right to the heart of childlike playfulness, lightheartedness, and spontaneity. Yes, for (as we will see in a moment) while lightheartedness is the atmosphere in which virtue grows most freely and expansively, and in which sanctity has space to breathe and take possession of all of life, it is also true that the fullness of spiritual childhood is only possible as the fruit of mature virtue and a total surrender of one’s entire life to God. In other words, as fallen human beings lightness does not come naturally to us (rather sad and self-centered sobriety does, or flippant surface-skimming superficiality, depending on our disposition). True sanctity—which includes virtue while also transcending and holding virtue—is the begetter of true lightheartedness and the safeguard of true freedom, of the “mature spontaneity” of which John Paul II speaks. For virtue is not a self-enclosed disposition achieved merely by human effort, a kind of mere acquired habit of good action (though all of this is present on a human level); rather, virtue is the blossoming of the fullness of living relationship with reality, and above all with the Author of reality.

Full virtue is fullness of grace. It is sanctity: the ceaseless dependence of a little child on the sustaining love of the eternal Father, and participation in the filial life of the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, by the power and working of the Holy Spirit. It is *to live Christ*, to live in and through his own ceaseless reliance, at every moment, on the love of his Father, not only for his action but for his very identity. His whole being was, and is for all eternity, pure relationship with the Father. So too, as we enter more and more deeply into this same relationship through faith, into unmediated contact with all of reality that speaks of God, and above all with God himself, we enter into the fullness of *filial existence*, indeed into the fullness of *nuptial existence*, and find our lives fulfilled in intimacy. All of our aspirations and desires, all of the rich potentialities and capacities of our humanity are brought to blossoming and fulfillment in abiding intimacy with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in participation in their own innermost life of love. Yes, our whole being, from body to spirit, from thought to desire to action to feeling, is *permeated* by the presence of the Trinity, and irradiated with his life.

This, too, is how the saints, those most totally and unconditionally surrendered to God, those who have been so totally grasped and transfigured by him and his grace, can see so clearly and transparently. The complexities that trip us up, confusing us and bogging us down on the surface, are often like transparent glass for them. They see right through to God. Or perhaps

better: they see all things through God, in God, and with God, and thus see things as they truly are. This is authentic freedom and the birth of joyful, lighthearted, and spontaneous confidence in response to the voice and presence of God in each and every thing, and each and every thing in God, such that love flowers freely from the human heart as a gift responding to God's gift in every moment.

DAY 20
TRUE AND FALSE RESPONSIBILITY

In his delightful reflections on the Song of Songs to his brother monks, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux did not need to speak about an atmosphere of playfulness and wonder; the Middle Ages, in their purest and highest expression (think of Francis of Assisi or Thomas Aquinas) were in large part bathed in it, springing from the wellspring of evangelical truth which had so deeply pervaded the mind and imagination of that culture. The spirit of the Holy Family was still very much alive, and we can feel the heartbeat of Mary and Joseph in the wonder-filled commentaries of so many of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church. They read and interpreted Scripture in *an atmosphere of faith*, with profound confidence in the trustworthiness of God and in his immeasurable love. But today, after the culture-shattering intellectual and spiritual trauma of the Protestant revolt, followed by the growth of atheistic humanism and scientific criticism, and the earthquake of the two world wars, the holocaust, and the other terrible events of the twentieth century, down to the very foundations of truth, goodness, and beauty being replaced in our world by the absurdity of “self-defined reality”—today, after all of this, we live very far from an atmosphere of child-like faith. In truth, we feel threatened, like sailors lost at sea, with the waves crashing all about us, in a world that is inimical to faith, if not simply apathetic to it.

The roadside shrines of the Middle Ages, portraying before all pilgrim eyes the Cross of Christ and the watchful presence of his saints, have been replaced by billboards advertising happiness through material consumption. The sober and playful celebrations of the sacred mysteries, particularly Christmas and Easter, have been drained of their Christian meaning and replaced with a meaning almost entirely secular. All Hollow’s Eve has become Halloween, the Christ-Child has been replaced by Santa Claus, and the Risen Lord has been ousted by the Easter Bunny. And we Christians stand by and watch, or even participate in these paganized rituals as if they were on a par with the age-old Christian celebrations of those events that changed the face of the earth and altered the history of the entire world. But the point I am making here is that railing against what is wrong with the world (as much as pointing out error is necessary) shall not lead to the definitive healing of our culture. Rather, a *deeper witness must be given*. This is the witness of *Christian joy*.

It is the joy we shall soon see, hopefully in great measure, in our reflections upon the Christmas mystery, which stirred the wise men to “rejoice exceedingly with great joy” (talk about superlatives!). May we too come to know the immeasurable, all-pervading joy of beholding “the child and his mother” as did the wise men, as did Joseph of Nazareth each day of his life. How could he not be the most wonder-filled and playful of all the saints? How could this humble carpenter of Nazareth, this obscure descendant of

king David married to a daughter in the line of David, into whose care was entrusted the very Son of God incarnate—how could he not live a life totally saturated in joy?

In addition to the playful lightheartedness of true faith, we can also discern in this passage about Joseph's obedience to the angel, and his "receiving" of Mary and her child, his deep spirit of *reverence*. We have spoken in earlier reflections about the mystery of entrustment, of God's "gifting" of two persons to one another within the orbit of his own love. This mutual gift is a manifestation not only of the meaning of human existence, but of the inner life of the Trinity itself, in which the divine Persons exist in a ceaseless state of gift before one another. Of course, the meaning of human existence *is* precisely to participate in the inner life of God, not only in our eternal destiny, but in all the smallest details of daily life and relationship in this world. The life of the Holy Family, the beginning of which we have glimpsed in the scriptural text, is one of the richest and fullest expressions of human life transfigured in the love of the Trinity, and permeated through and through by the life of God.

Let us therefore return to this reality for a moment before concluding our contemplation of these verses. The playfulness explored above is not contrary to, but rather enfolds and permeates, a beautiful dimension of the mystery of entrustment: namely, *responsibility for the other*. John Paul II mentioned this in the quotes included from him above. To be entrusted with the other is both to be *gifted* with them as well as *tasked* with them. To be responsible for another, however, does not mean to let myself be "used" by them on the basis of their own neediness, nor to be for them what only Christ can be; nor does it mean that I am responsible for their ultimate well-being and all the details of their life. Excessive responsibility is perhaps one of the major false presuppositions of our culture which hinders the transparency and simplicity of human relationships—whether that of a mother for her children, of spouses for one another, of priests for his parishioners, etc. But what defines false responsibility from true responsibility? False responsibility seeks to control things in the life or the heart of the other person which are beyond external human capacity, and are the prerogative of God alone, in the intimate sanctuary of the human heart. By external force or coercion, by a form of violence or power (however subtle), I seek to sway the other person or to take responsibility for them in the space where they alone can accept responsibility for themselves.

But what, then, is true responsibility? As the etymology of the word indicates, responsibility is *an abiding readiness to respond*, a commitment to be devoted to the other person and to their authentic well-being in all that the call of God dictates in the present and in the future (whether this call is made known through prayer, the circumstances of life, or the trajectory of the other person's interior journey which they share with us). We see all of this played out very explicitly in the life of Saint Joseph, who was entrusted with Mary and Jesus, and thus was *responsible for them before God*. His responsibility did not consist in "taking control" of the lives of these persons, or even "overseeing" the mystery that was unfolding before him. It con-

sisted in reverently enfolding the mystery that surpassed his comprehension, while also placing his life entirely at the service of this same mystery, so that it could follow its course in all of its inner truth and bear the fruit that God intended it to bear. And as for the persons in whom this mystery lived (well, in Joseph's case they were more or less inseparable, weren't they?), he sought only to care for them in all that was truly good for them in the sight of God; and to do this, he must have listened with profound receptivity and readiness to follow where God led, with as radical an obedience, as childlike a trust, as did Mary and Jesus themselves. He did not stand far off, but rather joined intimately with them in the very awesome mystery that unfolded itself at the heart of time and space—the very life of the Trinity—spreading out from the heart of Jesus Christ, to permeate, heal, and renew the entire universe.

The ministers of the Church would do well to remember this, as would all parents before their children, in that, though the lives of God's children are entrusted to them, God alone is the ultimate arbiter over human consciences, and he bestows many gifts which should be respected in their gradual growth to maturity, rather than flippantly scrutinized and dismissed since they do not fit in with one's own preconceived ideas about what God should be doing in human hearts. Of course, particularly in the case of those bearing shepherding authority in the Church, they are called to "discern" between the spirits of good and evil, and those who are receiving the authentic gifts of God always yearn to surrender to this, always long for their lives to be seen and recognized by those in authority in the Church.

We will return to these rich reflections tomorrow.

DAY 21
BATHED IN THE LIGHT OF HIS MERCY

As I indicated in the previous reflection, the Marian receptivity of hearts before God spontaneously thirsts to be sheltered by the masculine authority that God has given to Peter and the other apostles (living still within the pope and the bishops in communion with him). Here too the mystery of entrustment plays out, as does the rich interrelationship between what is masculine and what is feminine in the Church. Every soul before God is feminine; the Church herself is feminine. Even the stance of John, the beloved disciple, as he stands at the foot of the Cross with Mary at his side, is primarily feminine. But the feminine is entrusted to the masculine, and is open to the gift that comes only from the masculine: *first* from the Bridegroom Christ, and, in him, from the Father. So Mary and John receive the gift of the Crucified One, together, side by side. And they are both entrusted into the orbit of his divine love, the ultimate origin and consummation of all that is masculine. But Mary also, *second*, lets herself be entrusted to John, just as she was entrusted to Joseph earlier in her life, so that she could experience Christ's abiding presence, his masculine sheltering, in the living continuity of his apostles who had received priesthood and authority in his name and as the fruit of his Cross.

John, the beloved disciple, is a beautiful example of a feminized masculinity, of a Marian-apostleship, of a mystical priesthood. His own experience helps to bridge over these different dimensions of masculinity and femininity within the Church, of the Petrine and the Marian, as his own Johannine experience was both apostolic and priestly (masculine) but also deeply intimate, nuptial, and mystical (feminine). The same can be true in each one of us, in our own unique lives, since God wishes for us all to be more than our own "self-definitions," our own particular roles or gifts. He desires, rather, that all of this comes together—albeit with the unique nuances always proper to our individuality within this world—in the convergence-place of the heart where all becomes one in the embrace of the Trinity, in the embrace, indeed, of Jesus and Mary, Christ and the Church.

But let us return to Joseph, who is more properly the subject of these specific reflections. He was truly asked to be the custodian of the universal Church in her "seed-form," in her most delicate and sacred germination and growth during the conception, nativity, and maturation of Jesus Christ, and of his communion with the woman, Mary, who was united to him first as Mother and then, later (at the Cross), as Virgin-Bride. This latter movement, however, reached consummation after Joseph's death (since he did not live to witness the crucifixion of his Son), and was therefore witnessed by Joseph's spiritual "successor" in the custodianship of Mary and of the mystery of Christ: the beloved disciple, John. This spiritual heritage shared by Joseph and John would benefit us great to appreciate more deeply, and, as we have seen here, it bears rich insights for us, and many

subtle but beautiful implications for our own lives.

Let us pull out a single implication from all of this, thus, also, coming full circle to the question with which we began: the question about the true meaning of responsibility. The literal definition of responsibility implies being called to give an account for one's stewardship, for that which has been entrusted to one's care; but this "being able to respond" to the One who entrusts is also, as we said, a "response regarding one's response." How deeply have I received, cherished, fostered, protected, and affirmed this gift? God will not ask for a response from me regarding that which he did not entrust to me, that which did not elicit my freedom in response—the problems of others, private affairs beyond my control, and many other matters which are "too high for me" (Ps 131). Rather, he seeks precisely to gaze into my heart to see how I am receiving the gifts that he bestows upon me, and how vulnerably, lovingly, and authentically I am allowing my heart to be harnessed as a gift in response.

Here, indeed, we have exactly the context in which the Sacrament of Mercy manifests its richness: in the distance between the immeasurable gifts bestowed upon me by God and my always inadequate and faltering response. The Sacrament is the safeguard and the perpetual reminder that responsibility before God does not mean "performing perfectly" or "being successful," but rather simply *the integrity of faith*. It is honesty and humility before the gift. It is love before the gift. And the betrayal of the gift is sin. So it was in the Garden of Eden, in which Adam and Eve spurned the gifts of God, and so it is in every sin we commit since, either by rejecting these gifts, treating them with apathy, or appropriating them in pride and possessiveness. And the great gift of the Sacrament of Mercy is precisely that we are invited to receive anew and anew, in all of our faltering efforts at fidelity, the gratuitous gaze of God's cherishing mercy, and his love that surpasses all particular responsibilities in the pure intimacy of mutual belonging. It is precisely this gratuitous love, this sacred space of belovedness, which allows us to embrace all that is entrusted to us, all the sacredness of others, all the gifts of God, even our own fidelity and growth in sanctity, with a spirit of lightness, relaxation, and joy, since all is enfolded in the world-cradling embrace of God, and our own care for them is but a small participation in his perfect care.

The final fruit of this Sacrament—and indeed of the simple experience of God's mercy and love in general—is the liberating awareness that our entrance into "the joy of the Lord" (Mt 25:23) is not conditioned upon our own perfect stewardship or our own performance, but precisely on our *openness to receive the primal gift of all: God's redeeming love and atoning mercy*. This is what Saint Thérèse understood so well when, in contrast to the pervading Jansenism of her day, she said that she would stand before God at the end of her life with open hands, claiming none of her good works as her own. And God, she said, would therefore deign to bestow upon her everything good as a pure gift, since she claimed nothing as her own, but gave it all away. This, in fact, was simply a deep recognition of the actual state of *all* human life, even in this world, in that our own "right-

eousness” is not a private possession to be flaunted before God, but rather simply our participation in the poverty of the Trinity’s own eternal love, which receives and gives without condition or limit, and claims nothing as its own. We find ourselves secure, rather, simply in the reception of mercy, in standing before God precisely in this openness to receive—for we know that we have been purchased with the Blood of Christ and sealed for eternity by the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

Thérèse intuited the very core of the Gospel message as “the revelation in Jesus Christ of God’s mercy to sinners” (par 1846), in that we are saved by God not on the basis of our own merits or achievements but as a sheer act of redeeming mercy on the part of God, through the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. And yet at the heart of her message, too, is the mysterious link between *justification* and *sanctification*, two aspects of the grace of redemption which are distinct and yet inseparable from one another in the single mystery of salvation. *Justification* is the primal gift of salvation by which we are “made right with God” again through undeserved mercy, through the Sacrifice of Christ which restores right relationship between God and man by the surging currents of grace, of love, which he has poured forth into the ailing heart of humanity. This gift of justification is received without any deserving on our part, by sheer gift, in the grace of faith and baptism. But this grace is not a mere legal sentence of “rightness,” like a pardon before a jury or an atonement “bought at a price” (though clearly the Scriptures use this image to approach the mystery); it is above all the re-establishment of reciprocal relationship between God and ourselves. Thus it is also the living outpouring of God’s very life and love into us, a seed of communion that is meant to grow throughout our lives, maturing through grace—which elicits and sustains human cooperation—in the *sanctification* of our whole being and existence, until it attains final consummation in the joy of everlasting intimacy with God in eternal life.

Saint Thérèse deeply expressed that the *only* prerequisite of the grace of salvation and eternal life is *openness to be saved by God*, and thus receiving mercy from God, repentance for sin. This is adequate for God to carry us across the boundary of death and to deliver us from eternal damnation, the separation from him due to sin, preparing us for eternal life with him in everlasting bliss. But this eternal life itself calls for more (and thus the necessity of sanctification in this life or purgatory after death): it calls for the total permeation of our entire being by the energies of divine grace and our full participation, in our whole being, in the life and love of the Trinity. And, mysteriously, these two facets of salvation have the same root; at their core they share in the same disposition. It is not as if the sinner is poor before God, whereas the righteous person is rich. Rather, as Saint Thérèse intuited, the repentant sinner is learning to be poor, to open poverty to God’s gift of mercy, and the saint is poorest of all, claiming nothing as their own and recognizing all as gift, all as grace, all as the outpouring of the love and truth of God. And this is the only true wealth and rich abundance.

WEEK IV

The Faith of Joseph
and the
Consolation of Joseph

DAY 22
I CARRY YOU WITHIN ME

The exodus from Egypt was in a sense the high point and the defining moment in the history of Israel, the act of God which solidified their identity as God's chosen people and led them into the fullness of covenantal relation that he desired to have with them. And yet this looked forward, not only to their full "settlement" in the promised land, and the building of the temple, which was achieved in king David and his son, Solomon, but ultimately to the coming of the Messiah, the new Moses, the definitive Redeemer. All the events of salvation history incline in this direction, foreshadowing or preparing hearts for the coming of the Messiah.

Just as Moses was saved from the fearful wrath of a king jealous of his power—by being hidden in a basket released on the river—so too Jesus is saved from the wrath of king Herod by being taken by his parents into Egypt. And just as Moses encountered God in the desert—at the burning bush—and from there became the messenger and representative of God's compassion for his people, so Jesus' public life is immediately preceded by his forty days in the desert. Just as Moses led Israel across the Red Sea and to the edge of the promised land—and then Joshua definitively introduced them, across the Jordan, into the land—so too Jesus, the true Joshua (*Jehoshua*, God's Salvation), begins his journey with his baptism in the Jordan, reliving the final stages of the exodus. And Jesus explicitly presents himself, too, as the new Moses; for as he begins to teach the people, he "goes up on a mountain," just as Moses received the law on Mount Sinai and mediated it to the people, and sits down to teach: in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives us the "new Torah" of the everlasting Covenant, and fulfills all the hopes and promises of the first Torah, traditionally penned by Moses' own hand and recounting the marvelous works of God at the beginning of Israel's history.

These are the broad strokes. But let us make one more point and then "hone in" on the specifics of the event that stands before us, to try to sink our hearts into the concrete path that the Holy Family walked. For our deepest desire is not merely to look at prophecies or to make general statements about these events, but to draw near, with receptive and reverent hearts, to the beautiful persons who love us so deeply, and whom we desire to love in response, and to see and feel with them the hand of God in their lives. The final point to make before this is as follows. The coming of the Son of God in the flesh has brought to completion, raised to an infinitely higher level, a dimension of human existence that marks the life of all of us since the beginning of time, and which becomes particularly visible in God's relationship with his chosen people. This is what has been termed, theologically, "corporate personality" or "communal personality." It means that a single individual can stand before God on behalf of an entire people, as their representative, bearing in himself or herself their own sufferings,

desires, and joys, and mediating to them God's activity while bearing before God their own prayers. In this process, the person becomes a meeting-place of God and humanity, bearing many hearts within itself before God and bearing God, in and through itself, into many hearts. Thus Moses represented all of Israel, and Abraham bore in his loins all people of faith to come, and Adam and Eve represented, and bore responsibility for, all of humanity that was to come. So too, Mary is the model and archetype of faith for every believer, and in her we find our own faith sheltered (so much so that she *is the Church in person* before the Church itself is fully born, as a visible society, on Pentecost).

This is all true, but we desire to simplify this and to make it much more concrete, since the abstract theological term bears in itself a certain danger of abstraction which leads to neglect of the unique and unrepeatable dignity of each individual person and makes of them only a "part" of, or a "representative" of, the whole. The truth in fact goes in the opposite direction, and that is the danger of abstraction, that it tends to give primacy to the generalized or universal concept over the singularity of the concrete person. But God's way of operating is the opposite, since for him *everything is singular and concrete*. He never loves in the abstract, never approaches his children or cherishes them or acts within their lives as a mere "whole," never saves them as a mere mass, as a mere community. Rather, the truth expressed by this "communal personality" is not a submersion of the individual in the whole, but a profound affirmation of the depth of love and expansiveness of heart possible to the individual; it is also, on the other side, a profound affirmation of the deep bonds of mutual belonging, indeed co-experience, that unite us as a single human family, and, even more deeply, as a single mystical Body in the redeeming space of Christ's Risen Flesh.

Indeed, here we stand at the heart of evangelical reality and of what it means to be human, for here we stand at the place where we come to experience the truth of being fashioned "in the image and likeness of God." For here, in this rich interrelationship of *person* and *communion*, of my own unique and unrepeatable solitude before God—my precious "I" which he loves for its own sake—and also my radical openness both to the "Thou" of God as well as to the whole world of created "you's" of my brothers and sisters, we touch upon our vocation to share in the very manner of life and love proper to the Trinity. For in the bosom of the Trinity, person and communion are not opposed but perfectly united: each of the divine Persons exists in a ceaseless vulnerable relationship of love with each of the other Persons, as "I" and "You" are sheltered and fulfilled in the "We" of mutual belonging. Indeed, before the "We," and giving it meaning, there is the joy expressed by Jesus repeatedly in John's Gospel: "I in you, and you in me" (Jn 15-17). The Father in the Son and the Son in the Father, the Spirit in the Son and the Father, and the Father and Son both in the Spirit.

This is mutual indwelling, the shelter of my own heart, of all that concerns me, in the orbit of the love of another. It is also the making of my own being, my own heart, a home for the beloved, a welcoming-space in

which they may rest, rejoice, and play. The meeting of two irreplaceable solitudes, in other words, when they reciprocate one another's love in the true vulnerability of mutual surrender, come together in authentic communion, becoming-one through an intimacy that truly allows them to live in one another, vivified by the other's life and ultimately coming to live a single life that both cherishes and affirms their uniqueness (rather than destroying or belittling it) while also bringing this uniqueness to full blossom in the expansive embrace of shared love and intimacy.

With all of this said, we can return to the theme of communal personality with more specificity, and avoid the danger of impersonalism or anonymity towards which it tends. The main point in all of this, perhaps, is that our hearts are much deeper and wider than we realize. We have been created in relationship, from relationship, and for relationship—born of Love, through Love, for Love, and are destined to share eternally in the Intimacy of Love. And this effects not only our ethical choices, our co-responsibility for one another, or even our eternal destiny of intimacy with the Trinity and of communion with all of humanity in the new creation. It also effects the very fabric of our daily experience in the here and now, such that the subtleties of our subjective experience, as private as they seem, are never *merely* our own, but also reverberate in the living-space of communion—in the solidarity of the single family of natural humanity and even more deeply in the vibrant communion of grace brought about in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. Every one of our experiences, choices, and actions, and every touch of God's love and grace upon our hearts, also sends ripples out—for good or ill—into the hearts of others, just as we, too, receive ripples cast from them and are affected by them. Indeed, many of the experiences that we have in life may be caused, at least in part, by forces of which we are unaware, by ripples cast from the heart of another person and entrusted to us to carry in love and compassion, in a spirit of redeeming solidarity that shares in the atoning love of Christ on the Cross. So too the inflow of grace into our heart, the experience of God's touch and his gentleness, the breaking down of the barriers of our sin and selfishness and fear, may be in part mediated by the faith and love of others throughout the world. We are truly all one family, not only naturally, but above all supernaturally. And here we come to the decisive point.

In Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, this mystery of an individual carrying the community and making them one within himself reaches its final conclusion and full blossoming. Indeed, in this lies precisely the awesome mystery of Redemption and the reality of atonement (“making-one”). Because he is God himself, when the Son came to us and wed himself to our humanity in the womb of the Virgin, assuming this humanity as his own, he did not take a merely individual humanity, but also *the humanity of each one of us, the humanity of all of us*. Thus he permeated the whole human race and every single human life with the radiant light of his own redeeming presence, yes, with the presence of the entire Trinity. And he lifted us up in himself to carry us back to the Father (like the shepherd lifting his lost sheep on his shoulders to carry it home), co-living with us

and for us all of our own experiences, both joyful and painful.

He carried us in his loving Heart, in his very incarnate Body, even through the agony and death on the Cross, in which he suffered all the pain caused by our sins and isolation, and into the joy of the Resurrection, in which the whole of humanity, in him, was introduced into a new dimension of existence, the dimension of boundless Love and perfect Intimacy. This dimension is that which shall be fully realized in all of us—as has been realized already in him, and in which we share already through grace—at the end of time, when our bodies will rise and be re-made, transparent not only to our spirit, our inner heart, but to the very love and communion of the Trinity. And here the universe itself will be utterly saturated by the beauty of God and of the world-wide communion that pervades all things, sheltering and cherishing each human heart as God's singularly beloved, and yet fulfilled in the embrace of intimacy that makes all of us one as the Trinity is one.

DAY 23
AT THE THROBBING HEART OF ALL THINGS

The depth of communion opened up in the Body of Christ is amazing, the reciprocal circulation of love and life that permeates the Church, and indeed all of humanity, as it flows from the bosom of the Trinity through the Heart of Jesus and into his members, and among members, uniting and enriching them, until it carries us all back into the embrace of God once again, where all shall be made one in him who shall be “All in all.” This means that all of my most intimate experiences are significant for the whole of humanity, and even my most hidden desires and prayers spontaneously—if hiddenly—flow forth to touch the hearts of others and to bear fruit in them. So too, flowing in the opposite direction, I am granted to experience for and with others the resonance of their own pain, hope, and desire. Are there places in the world that I wish I could go, to be with those who suffer? I am, in a real way, already there, as they are here with me. Are there intentions that are precious and important to my heart, for which I desire to offer myself to God on their behalf? God sees these bonds of love as real; indeed, they are the realest of the real, participating as they do in the very substantial current of his own grace, his own love, his own uncreated life that flows in us and through us, touching, healing, and renewing, and preparing all of humanity to make its return, as beloved in the arms of her Lover, into the heart of his own cherishing embrace.

And the Heart of Jesus was from the first moment of his Incarnation, and ever shall be, the Convergence Point in which all of these currents flow together into unity, like lines intersecting on a single point, as well as the Wellspring from which all graces flow forth to permeate the entire universe. He is truly the Convergence Point and the Wellspring, and he becomes most fully and visibly so upon his Holy Cross and in his glorious Resurrection: he is the divine Magnet lifted up from the earth to draw all unto himself (cf. Jn 12:32; 11:52; Eph 2:11-22; Col 1:15-20), and the Fountain of life, pierced by a lance and pouring out Blood and water, like torrents irrigating the entire world and making it new (cf. Jn 19:34; 7:37-39; Ez 47:12; Rev 22:1-5).

Yes, even the little infant Christ riding with his mother on a donkey into the land of Egypt bears the whole of humanity within himself. He is experiencing, with them and for them, the pain of exile, of homelessness, of persecution, and yet pervading it all with the light of the divine gaze and sanctifying it fully by the radiant beauty of total dependence upon the love of the Father. And Mary and Joseph are with him in this, the true “poor of the Lord,” walking the path of poverty in total trust and radical surrender, and in the lightness, joy, and freedom which, we have seen, marks the atmosphere of true faith and intimacy with God.

If only we could experience with the Holy Family this flight into Egypt, to be with them in the insecurity of fugitives, in the total reliance upon

God, in the sober intimacy of the life of love that they lived in their exile, and their confident patience in awaiting the journey home! But, in fact, *we can*. That is precisely the point that has emerged from the preceding reflections. All that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph experienced in their life is ours: it is open for us to participate in, to co-experience, and, through this participation, to come to know God's presence and his love more deeply, as they did. But above all, the experience of the Holy Family moves in the opposite direction: it is their drawing near to us, God's drawing near to us, in the exile that each one of us experiences, in our own spiritual homelessness, our own defenselessness before forces far greater than us.

Do we not all long for the experience of God's presence to us in the here-and-now of our lives? Do we not wish, in particular, for the certainty of Christ's contemporaneity? In other words, to know him with the same directness and intimacy that was granted to the first disciples, who actually walked with him on the roads of Palestine? The sense of God's absence is indeed quite tangible in the world of today, and there are various efforts being made to try to make him more felt, more palpable, in a culture from which he has been all but completely excluded. But there is a danger in all of this, that the God presented—the Christ presented to our view—is not the *real* Jesus as found in Scripture, but a construct of our imaginings and preferences. I think for example of contemporary movies or television series that attempt to portray the life of Jesus and his disciples, but fall into the trap of presenting almost entirely non-biblical imaginings rather than the sobriety of historical fact and the mystery of biblical faith, in which Christ is both intimately near and also profoundly ungraspable in his ineffable divine-human mystery.

But beyond all this, there is a consoling truth: God has himself provided the means by which he is intimately present to us and with us until the end of time. He is truly forever contemporary with us, walking with us in all the details of our lives as intimately as he walked the earth two-thousand years ago, and also inviting us to leave everything to follow him with the same specificity, and the same closeness, as did his first disciples. As we have said before, *the Church is the contemporaneity of Christ* with human persons throughout time. To experience his presence, his love, and to come to know him as he truly is—in all the undimmed radiance of his truth—we need only open our hearts to his self-revelation in the word of Scripture as magnified and expounded in the teaching of the Church, and to welcome his mystery as perpetually made alive, re-presented as a present event, in her Sacraments and her Liturgy.

The Church is the custodian of the true mystery of Christ, indeed of God's self-revelation in its fullness. There is a reason that Saint Joseph has been called the "patron of the universal Church," for just as he stood as father over the household of the Holy Family, as he enfolded it in the cherishing tenderness of his masculine love, so too he stands in care for the entire Church, Bride and Mother, and each one of her children. He continues to live just as truly as he lived during his earthly life—or rather more so. So too the Blessed Mother, Mary, lives eternally in God, and her maternal,

feminine, bridal, and virginal presence permeates every single fiber of the Church, all of her Sacraments and institutions and structures and can be found in every one of her teachings. This is because the Church is Bride, in the likeness of the first Bride, Mary; the Church is Virgin Mother, in the likeness of the Virgin Mother of God, Mary. Indeed, it is a matter of more than likeness; it is more like identification: Mary continues to live in the Church as her foremost member and her personal concretization: she is the Church as fully realized in a single individual, united to the divine Bridegroom in perfect nuptial intimacy and, from this intimacy, conceiving and birthing the divine life more deeply in the world. And Joseph's masculine, fatherly presence is always there, enfolding and sheltering the feminine, bridal, and Marian mystery of the Church, in the name of the Father and on his behalf. So we can say that *the Church is Mary*, enfolded in the fatherhood and spousehood of Joseph, but even more so in the very Reality that he only reflects and serves: in the fatherly love of the eternal Father and in the love of the divine Bridegroom, Jesus Christ.

But with the same degree of truth, or more so, we can affirm that *the Church is Christ*. This is the mysterious and beautiful interrelationship between those two primary images of the Church as used by Saint Paul: the Church is *Bride* and *Body* of Christ. Because the Church is Bride she also becomes Body. "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the Church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the Church, because we are members of his body. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church" (Eph 5:25-32). The distinction of *two*—man and woman, husband and wife, Christ and the Church—becomes *one* through the power of love. Thus the Bride, distinct from her Bridegroom as his beloved, also becomes his very Body, the extension of his presence throughout time and space, similar to the way that a man continues to live within a woman who has been joined to him in one flesh and carries his child in her womb. But of course the earthly analogy does not do justice to the depth and realism of the theological mystery.

But let us turn back from this to the point first being made: to encounter God in all the depth of his mystery, and to experience him as the truly living one and not a mere historical memory, we need only draw near to the Sacraments. Through these "divine mysteries" entrusted to the Church by Christ, he makes himself perpetually present in all the vigor of his love throughout time and space. And this is possible because of the very nature of the events that unfolded two-thousand years ago during the earthly life of Jesus, and, in particular, because of the realm he entered through his Resurrection. These events *live forever* because they were lived

by the very Son of God, experienced by God himself as man, and thus transcend the limits of time and space, of historical circumstance and human consciousness: they are now part of the eternity of God's own self-consciousness, taken up into the heart of the life of the Trinity. They are thus of eternal significance for all of humanity, just as they were first experienced in the singular humanity of the incarnate Son which bore in itself all of us, and lived for all of us every moment that made up his life within this world.

This is particularly true of the decisive moments at the climax of Jesus' life: of the Paschal Mystery. These events, from the Last Supper on Holy Thursday, through the Passion and Death on Good Friday, to the glory of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday, constitute a single event, a single indivisible whole in which each part is essential in illumining the others. For example, without the words of the Eucharistic gift: "This is my Body, given for you; this is my Blood, poured out for you," the gift of Christ's Body upon the Cross would not be full and complete. The latter simply unfolds the inner meaning within the former, just as the former sanctifies and consecrates the latter and makes it a true sacrifice, a sacrifice ordered to communion through the power of love stronger than death. And neither comes to fullness without the Resurrection, in which the sacramental gift of Body and Blood in the Eucharist (meaning all of Christ is his divine-human identity), and the sacrificial gift of Body and Blood in the Passion, bursts forth into the new dimension of eternal life unlocked through Love in the Resurrection.

Yes, for the Resurrection is the only truly possible fruit of what occurred in the three preceding days, and its inner unfolding: for the gift of God given in the Eucharist is not a dead gift, nor even a merely earthly life, but the very Risen Body of Jesus Christ given in advance, the living Body by which all of us live; so too the suffering of Jesus' compassion with us in the darkest place, by which he suffers with us and for us all the pain and loneliness of sin and death, and precisely thus bursts it open by the power of indestructible love and the intimacy that he bears with the Father even in this anguished place, is the birthing-pains that open up the place in the very core of humanity for the life of God to dwell, and simultaneously the carrying of humanity across the abyss of separation, through the birth-canal of death surmounted by grace, and into the innermost embrace of the Blessed Trinity.

By his Resurrection, in which we participate through the Sacraments—baptized into his Death and Resurrection, receiving his Risen Life in the Eucharist, cleansed by the Blood pouring from his opened side in Reconciliation—by his Resurrection humanity is truly admitted into a new form of existence that was closed to it before. For the body, beforehand marked by limitation, incapacity, suffering, and death, by the isolation that burdens our existence because of sin and weighs even upon our material flesh—this body has now been opened wide to be a pure space of loving receptivity and gift, of encounter and intimacy, pervaded through and through by the energies of the Trinity's own life and love, and made capable of loving with

the very love of the Trinity that surges within us. Though present in us in “seed” now, growing in us through the energies of grace to which we surrender in prayer and the Sacraments, and which seek to pervade all of our thought, feeling, choice, and activity, this newness shall attain consummation only at the end of time, in the resurrection of the body, in which our entire being, and indeed the whole universe, shall be re-created and made new in the likeness of the Resurrection of Jesus.

The resurrection of the body...the gift of Christ’s Body...the renewal of our own bodies... By “body” here we mean not merely our incarnate bodiliness, our particular physical structure with skin, muscle, bones, and organs; we mean *the whole of us*, in the truly biblical sense: the body refers to all of me, just as Jesus meant when he said “This is my Body.” He gives not just flesh, nor does he just give spirit; he does not give only his humanity, nor only his divinity: he gives everything in its fullness, in the indivisible unity that it is in the core of his own unique Person, in his own “I” as the Beloved Son of the Father. And by receiving this unified gift of the Bridegroom Christ, he seeks to draw us into the same gift, in the reciprocal surrender of ourselves, and into the same unity within ourselves through complete unity with God.

DAY 24
THE TWO JOSEPHS

Matthew 2:19-23. *But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." And he rose and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus reigned over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, "He shall be called a Nazarene."*

There are three things I wish to speak about concerning this passage: 1) the typology of the Joseph of the Old Covenant and the way that he prefigures the Joseph of the New, the husband of Mary; 2) the relationship of fear and faith, and how fear is transformed by faith, and thus also, what is healthy, natural fear and what is unhealthy; 3) finally, we will address the prophecy that Matthew quoted concerning the Messiah's being from Nazareth: "He shall be called a Nazarene." But first let us make a single point to tie in the return of the Holy Family to the promised land, and their making their home in Nazareth, to the previous reflection. It is quite beautiful to see, in fact, that they are anticipating the fulfillment of the very words of Jeremiah 31:

"At that time, says the LORD, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people." Thus says the LORD: "The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the LORD appeared to him from afar. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall adorn yourself with timbrels, and shall go forth in the dance of the merry-makers [literally translated: the playful!]. Again you shall plant vineyards upon the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit. For there shall be a day when watchmen will call in the hill country of Ephraim: 'Arise, and let us go up to Zion, to the LORD our God.'" For thus says the LORD: "Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, 'The LORD has saved his people, the remnant of Israel.' Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her who is in travail, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will make them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my first-born. Hear the word of the LORD, O nations,

and declare it in the coastlands afar off; say, 'He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock.' For the LORD has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall be like a watered garden, and they shall languish no more. Then shall the maidens rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. I will feast the soul of the priests with abundance, and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness, says the LORD. (Jer 31:1-13)

They are returning home to the land of Israel from a place of exile—in a new exodus that prefigures, in the intimacy of their family, the exodus of the whole people of Israel. Threatened as they are by the forces of evil that would rule over them, and experiencing the fear of those oppressed and afflicted, they nonetheless find in God both home and security. As the psalm says: "God will provide a home for the poor" (see Ps 68). So he does for Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, leading the father of this family by dreams to the place appointed for him: to Nazareth, where so many beautiful things shall unfold in the hidden sanctuary of the family life of father, mother, and Child.

These themes, providing a home, exile in Egypt, guidance through dreams, righteousness as a man, etc., all lead us to the first point: the typology of the Joseph of the Old Covenant, the son of Israel's predilection. The connections between Joseph, the second youngest son of Israel, and Joseph, son of David and husband of Mary, are indeed quite astounding. Let us unfold them shortly here, and try to make visible some of the beautiful lessons that they teach us. First of all, we see immediately that Joseph is *beloved*. The text of Genesis makes it quite explicit that Israel loves Joseph most of all his sons, "since he is the child of his old age" (Gen 37:3). Of course, true parental predilection does not compare children to one another and therefore does not create jealousy among brethren—and here we see again how God's revelation of himself meets his people where they are, tolerating their sins and imperfections even as he leads them ever deeper into the fullness of truth. Another example of God's patience with his people's blindness is the fact that Israel had children from four different women—as polygamy and concubinage were accepted practices of the time—even though "from the beginning it was not so" (Mt 19:8), and God is gradually leading his people to rediscover the unity and indissolubility of monogamous marriage as an image of God's love for his people and as a simple necessity for the true integrity of spousal love. This is hinted at in the text, in fact, in that the woman whom Israel loves is only one: Rachel. And it is of her that his sons Joseph and Benjamin are born, who are perhaps the most important of the tribes in terms of salvation history and the Messianic line (for Joseph saves his entire family from death by famine, and David the king is born of the house of Benjamin, and thus also, in David's line, the Joseph of the New Covenant).

But we have gotten off track. Let us return to the typology of Joseph the son of Israel. We said that Joseph was *beloved*. This is the important point to bring forth from the texts concerning Israel's love for Rachel and her son, Joseph. Among all the other "messiness" of the Old Testament accounts of the lives of the patriarchs, a *pure thread* emerges, a thread of authentic love. In this, Israel is a type of Christ the Bridegroom, loving Rachel so deeply (whom he meets at a well as Christ meets the Samaritan woman coming to draw water!) that he is willing to serve Rachel's father for fourteen years for the privilege of wedding her and being united to her. And Scripture says that the time "seemed but a few days because of the love that he had for her" (Gen 29:20). Here we see the ardent and yet pure pursuit of the bride by the Bridegroom, and his total devotion to her such that no efforts, no passage of time, no obstacles, will hold him back from his redeeming plan to liberate her from her bondage to sin and to draw her into the joy of the marital covenant. This is what God did for his people in the exodus from Egypt, and this is what God did for all of humanity in the final exodus of Christ's Paschal Mystery, in which we all find definitive redemption and the consummation of union with the Trinity.

From the archetype of such spousal love between Israel and Rachel, the old Joseph is born, just as the new Joseph is born as a radiant fruit of the true remnant of Israel, of that authentic thread of covenant-love that lasts through the ages even amidst so much infidelity and sin. Born of love, both Josephs live in love with a purity that is both admirable and profoundly necessary: issuing a call to all men to love with truly chaste hearts. Indeed, we can pull out the primal truth, so essential to our freedom as human persons, that the capacity to love springs forth first of all from the experience of being loved. Only in being loved first can I learn to love authentically. Only in receiving the gift of love that bestows upon me my very own existence can I come to experience the truth of my identity as beloved. And only from this place can I find the security, freedom, and expansiveness of heart to make myself a gift to others, that my love may also communicate to them the same love that I have received, the love that unveils identity and makes secure in the joy of belovedness. "In this is love, not that we loved him but that he loved us... Love one another as I have loved you..." (1 Jn 4:10; Jn 15:12).

This chastity in loving is a very strong theme between the two Josephs. In fact, the text of Genesis makes a point of highlighting Joseph's chastity in contrast to the sexual immorality and aggressiveness of his brothers. It does this by setting side by side their sins, recounted in detail, with his attempted seduction by Potiphar's wife (see Gen 38 and 39). She seeks to draw him into sin, even with great forcefulness, but he outright refuses, saying, "Behold, having me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand; he is not greater in this house than I am; nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife; how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gen 39:8-9). Such chastity is in fact rare to witness in the Old Covenant, as there are not many examples of men who

maintain complete chastity and transparency in love (even David falls into sexual sin, for example); the norm seems instead to be men who have multiple wives and concubines, and who are, to God's great sorrow, aggressive and possessive in their sexual exploits. But perhaps this is true, sadly, even of the life of the world in which we live. How rare is a masculine heart that is free of the dulling influence of lust and sexual passion, a masculine heart that looks upon women only with love and tenderness, with the desire to reverence, respect, protect, and uphold, rather than with the desire to use! Clearly in this the Joseph of the New Covenant stands in line with the Joseph of the Old Covenant.

But it is also true that those who are capable of love are often profoundly misunderstood by others, and the faithful are persecuted by those whose hearts are corrupted by hatred, jealousy, and lust. Joseph in the Old Testament is hated by his brothers (though for a little different reasons) and sold by them to a passing caravan of Ishmaelites, who bring him into Egypt, where he is eventually enslaved; so Joseph in the New Testament must flee from the wrath of Herod into Egypt in order to protect the woman and child entrusted into his care. Both Josephs go into Egypt, and yet there both of them provide for their family and discern in all events the guiding and tenderly caring hand of God. As the son of Israel says to his brothers: "You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones" (Gen 50:20-21). Joseph's sale to the Ishmaelites and his slavery (due to his chastity) ultimately gives way to his being placed over the household of Pharaoh, over the entire Egyptian kingdom, and Joseph, with his capacity to interpret dreams, is able to save countless lives from famine which he foretells in advance. Eventually his own family comes to join him in Egypt, and he is reunited with his father and his brothers. However, this story of the tribes of Israel in Egypt will only come full circle with the exodus under Moses, for after the death of Pharaoh, another arises who enslaves the people of Israel. They are in slavery for four-hundred years until the marvels worked by God during the time of Moses.

Joseph in the New Testament sums up this history of Israel in himself, does he not? He too is like the Joseph of old, providing for his family in Egypt, living with uprightness and integrity, particularly before the sacred mystery of woman. He too receives and understands the guidance of God through dreams, and he too is invited to trust in the loving care of the heavenly Father even in events that seem to be unfortunate and causes of only suffering. But he too surpasses the Joseph of old, not only in the full righteousness of the New Covenant that comes only from contact with and faith in Jesus Christ, but also in the fact that he *returns* from Egypt: he walks the path of exodus summed up in his own person, and enters into the home that God has prepared, where the Church is made manifest in her fullness in "seed form," in the intimacy of the Holy Family of Nazareth.

DAY 25
DO NOT BE AFRAID:
JOSEPH'S WORD TO OUR WORLD

“Do not be afraid... I will provide for you and your little ones” (Gen 50:21). I feel that this is what Saint Joseph is saying to our world today, and what he has spoken in the heart of God’s Church since the beginning. “Do not be afraid, for I will provide, as I provided for those entrusted to my care at the start, when God placed within the orbit of my love the Virgin Mary and her Son, Jesus Christ.” Joseph of Nazareth, like the Joseph of old, was placed over the entire household, to provide for God’s children in his name. And he did so with great wisdom and integrity, being a just man who had learned to listen deeply to the voice and guidance of God, and to follow him with profound, childlike docility.

In fact, this ability to listen and follow is the prime condition for being a good leader; and the radical trust that allows God to provide for every need is the condition for being able to provide for others, since one’s own providence is nothing but a participation in the perfect fatherly providence of God. Even in great insecurity and fear, as we see in the early life of the Holy Family—fleeing from the murderous intent of Herod and taking refuge in a foreign land, and even on returning home living in a country ruled by Herod’s successor—the human heart is invited to trust in the all-enfolding goodness of God.

And this trust, as a gift of God himself infused into us by grace, as a participation in his own eternal security, is not measured: “for it is not by measure that he gives the Spirit” (Jn 3:34). Therefore it is not frail, threatened by the suffering and darkness in this world, but is rather boundless and infinite, rooted in the infinite love of God. Nonetheless, it meets us in the place where we are most vulnerable, in our profound need and poverty, and seeks to pervade our insecurities and fears. Thus in the heart of every single human life there is this meeting of *fear* and *faith*. Fear is our inheritance due to sin, which has fractured the entire universe and has ruptured our contact with the Love that lies at the origin and foundation of our existence. But faith is the human response, born of God’s own activity within us, to the approach of Love which seeks to re-establish relationship with us. Indeed, our response to Love is itself Love’s gift; our faith which accepts grace is itself a grace. This is the marvelous poverty of which Saint Augustine spoke so deeply: without God I can do nothing good, and even the slightest movements of my heart towards beauty, goodness, or truth are sustained by God and his grace.

Perhaps this kind of dependency seems suffocating, or seems to eradicate human freedom. But the opposite is really the case. Total dependence on God is not suffocating for us since it is the very disposition for which we were created; it corresponds, in other words, to the deepest capacities of our being, the truest aspirations of our hearts, and the most authentic ener-

gies of our humanity. It is not in mere autonomy that we find fulfillment; rather, we find fulfillment in surrendering and joining our autonomy to God, our will to God's will, our mind to God's mind, our heart to God's heart, such that our every desire, choice, and act becomes not only *mine* but *his*, becomes *ours*. This is what it means, spiritually, to be a *child*, to enter into a *filial* relationship with God. A child is free to rejoice and dance and play, to act with carefree abandonment, precisely because he knows that he is perfectly held in the loving will and tender care of the heavenly Father.

Jesus himself, in fact, is the deepest example of this filial dependency, and not only in his human existence, but at the very heart of his divine life with the Father for all eternity. For he *is* Son, in the very fabric of his being; he is Son as Person, the One who is eternally related to the Father in intimate love, born of trusting acceptance and reciprocal surrender. And the Spirit is precisely this bond of love that Father and Son share; he is the kiss of their union, the breath of their mutual self-giving. He is the synergy of their activity in which both operate in a single life in a harmony that is complete, not in eradicating the uniqueness of the Persons, but precisely in flowing forth from them and affirming this uniqueness in being given to one another and received and cherished by one another.

Christ spoke explicitly of this in many different ways throughout his life, and thus allowed us to glimpse something of the secret, inner life of the Trinity that shall be fully visible to us only after the veil of this mortal life is torn. He said: "The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise." And why? "For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing" (Jn 5:19-20). Yes! The Son acts in perfect harmony with the Father, as the Father has shown him, because the Father's will is nothing but his love, it is his tenderest gift of self to his Son! So it is for each one of us. After all, Christ explicitly extended this dependency to us, and incorporated us into this same life. We relate to Jesus, as disciples, in the way that Jesus relates to his Father; and through this, we come to abide *with* Jesus before his Father, in the fullness of filial intimacy.

For as John the Evangelist writes: "No one has ever seen God; the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has made him known" (Jn 1:18). And later in his Gospel, we see something marvelous: at the last supper "the disciple whom Jesus loved was reposing in his bosom" (Jn 13:23). Here the disciple reposes in the heart of the Son as the Son reposes in the heart of the Father. Here the human heart becomes thoroughly bridal, receiving the Eucharistic self-donation of the incarnate Son, his body given and blood outpoured, and becomes one flesh with him. And through this nuptial union, the heavenly Father becomes her Father too, just as a woman who marries a man becomes a daughter of his father. And in being intimately united to our Bridegroom, the incarnate Son of God, we come to live with his very life poured into us, as sap into a vine, as blood through the veins, as the very substance that makes up our earthly flesh transformed into his. And the life of the Son is nothing but the life of the Father which

he has received: “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has also granted the Son to have life in himself” (Jn 5:26). Drawn to the Son of God by the magnetism of divine love, we are grafted through grace into the very life of the Most Blessed Trinity, caught up into the heart of the circulation of love that ever occurs between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and thus into the everlasting joy of their perfect intimacy.

DAY 26
TO BE GOD'S LITTLE ONES

There is still more to say regarding the theme of fear and faith, but I wanted to conclude the previous reflection at the point that we did: at the center. Let us pick up again now and follow the trail in a different direction. Jesus knew and lived this disposition of radical trust in God and total dependency upon him from the wellspring of his own identity as the eternal Son of the Father. But he also knew it in the very concrete experiences of his humanity, which grew up and matured in the orbit of the intimacy of his parents, Mary and Joseph. The Holy Family knew, viscerally and experientially, in other words, the anxieties and fears of human existence. Matthew explicitly says that Joseph was “afraid” when he saw that Archelaus reigned in place of his father. Indeed, he probably even struggled with fear (as we all do), with that tug of insecurity that tempts the human heart to grasp for control in order to safeguard security for oneself. But the Gospels make it clear that, in the midst of everything, in all the messiness of human experience—from which Joseph and Mary were not spared, though the latter bore it in a nature free from all the effects of sin—they *chose to walk in faith*. And faith, as we have seen, is the only true liberation from fear, the exodus out of the narrowness of the need for self-centered control through the entrustment of oneself to a greater Love, to God.

The Holy Family walked a path of the “littlest ones,” without any earthly securities, without wealth or power or prestige or any other material or earthly affluence and control. They were humble people in a humble nation, one of many countries under occupation by the military and cultural superpower of Rome; they were a simple laborer, a housewife, and her son, in a religion that, despite being the cult of the chosen people of God, was so small, so humble, that it passed largely unnoticed by the world. Indeed, those who tried to turn the religion of poverty into the religion of control, into the religion of self-righteousness and sparkingly immaculate external practice, were those who received the sternest condemnations from the mouth of Jesus Christ.

So it is even to this day. Pharisaism continually crops up throughout history under different guises, and one of the prime faces it shows today is the painful trend of radical traditionalism that is trying so hard to present itself as authentic Catholicism. And in the process it is ravaging so many simple and generous hearts who do not know any better, preying upon their fears, insecurities, and desires for external guidelines of how to be in the right with God and secure in his love. This is something that concerns all of us, whether it affects us directly or not, since such trends of rigid externalism and pharisaic righteousness threaten actual schism within the single Body of the Church; but in fact, sometimes schism is actually healthier than acting like the wounded member does not exist, since then its infection can spread unnoticed into the rest of the Body, hurting even more children of

God. Thus the counter-reformation after the Protestant movement was so important: part of the healing of the Church, the excision of falsehoods that found no place in the sanctuary of the Church's faith as entrusted to her by Christ, and handed on and protected within the succession from the apostles. The same is true of the Second Vatican Council: it laid bare an illness within the Church, which was narrowing her faith and suffocating her love, closing her into a self-righteous defensiveness and limiting the breadth of her evangelical dynamism both in prayer and in missionary effort. Of course, another illness was also laid bare: the liberalism that refuses to bow in humility before the authority given by Christ to his apostles and their successors, particularly the successor of Saint Peter, the pope, and the relativistic subjectivism that rejects the heritage of the faith and doctrine and practice of the Church as outdated. In the process, this liberalism is not enlightened, lifted up, or renewed by Christ, but rather is corrupted and twisted by the world and its standards, placing more importance on current fads and wishes that spring from the wounds of sin rather than on the Word of God that alone heals and sets free: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free. ... Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not continue in the house forever; the son continues forever. So if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (Jn 8:32, 34-36).

Saint John has strong words concerning the tendency to conform to the world, whatever its particular passions may be in a given era (and in truth they are always the same, under different guises and to different degrees), just as Jesus (and Paul) had strong words against the rigidity of pharisaism:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides for ever. (1 Jn 2:15-17)

He who does the will of God abides forever. This is precisely the truth that we explored in its inmost meaning in the last reflection. And Jesus' words as quoted above relate directly to it: whoever commits sin is a slave to sin, and only the Son can set us free. This Son alone can bestow upon us again, in himself, our birthright as sons and daughters of the Father, heirs of the kingdom destined for home in the intimacy of heaven, in the bosom of the Trinity. The promise of sin is a seduction; it seduces us with liberty and autonomy, with complete freedom, and yet it leads only to slavery. It leads to the loss of self in the bondage of disordered passions, in the permeation of our life by fear which we cannot escape, in the weakening of our will to choose goodness, beauty, and truth, and in the blinding of the eyes of our hearts until we come to find ourselves stumbling in the darkness unsure of which way to go. To lessen the message of the Gospel to make it more "palatable," therefore, is not to do our world a favor, but rather more like withholding water from a man dying of thirst. So too, to present Christianity as a religion burdened by immeasurable rules, permeated by

the legalistic tradition that has afflicted Catholicism for far too long (since Aquinas gave way to Ockam in the thirteen century), is to forget the newness of the Gospel and its true, liberating beauty. For Christ came into this world to make us sons and daughters, to welcome us into the playground of the Father, where the rules of the house exist only to facilitate and liberate our capacity to live the life of holiness, happiness, and love to the utmost, and to drink deep of the joy that it gives.

Yes, the Son of God came among us, entering into our world, to play right in our midst, to love right in our midst, and thus to teach us how to love. The path is arduous, often times painful, and calls forth the complete and total gift of our entire being: a living sacrifice of every moment of our existence surrendered into the embrace of Love by love, and flowing from Love with love, a sweet and fragrant aroma that manifests simultaneously the beauty of the Trinity and the authentic beauty of humanity redeemed. (See Rom 12:1 and Eph 5:1-2.) But how can a heart that loves desire anything else but total gift: to welcome the gift of the divine Lover totally and completely into oneself, and to give oneself totally back into his welcoming embrace? Here sacrifice reveals its true meaning: it is not pain, it is not destruction, it is not even primarily renunciation or effort or activity; it is above all simply the manifestation of love responding to Love, permeating all of life and sweeping us up into the circulation of mutual self-giving between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In fact, the primal act of love, of sacrifice, of gift, is not to *give* myself, but rather to *welcome* the gift of the One who comes to me and loves me first. And even my own surrender is not an act that I myself can will or accomplish on my own. That would be like trying to sleep by “willing it.” Rather, surrender is the fruit of God’s touch harnessing my being and relaxing me in childlike trust, as fear dissolves and confidence takes its place, confidence born of absolute certainty in the infinite and eternal Love of God. Yes, here, as grace received permeates all the energies of my being, my own freedom is not destroyed but rather elicited, set free, and harnessed in cooperation with the amazing freedom of God, this freedom which is identical with eternal Truth and Love. In my smallest daily actions, in my humblest of prayers and desires, in my rest and repose, and ultimately in my very death, by which God leads me back to the total dependence of childlike trust and the complete surrender of spousal love, he draws me back into the heart of his own embrace. And here I share with him, already in this life and perfectly for all eternity, the very life of love that is forever his in the joy of consummated intimacy between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

DAY 27
MAKE YOUR NAZARETH IN US

“You keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock” (Is 26:3-4). We have tried to unfold this peace born of faith in the previous reflections. This is the peace that filled the life of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus even as they walked a path marked by insecurity and poverty. Yes, their earthly insecurity, as is the case for all of us, was held within the perfect security of God. And from the heart of his love, which cradles human hearts in a security far surpassing that offered by created things, God knows too how to lead his children ever deeper along the path of faith into the fullness of union. In Joseph’s gaze, we see that he led him through dreams. And the symbolism of dreams? God speaks in the place of our deepest relaxation, in the repose and restfulness of mind and will. Listening to God, in fact, does not consist in tightening oneself up like a taut string, but in sinking into wonder-filled openness, into the disposition of play, into an expectancy that is completely open not by a forceful, self-directed effort on our part but by a simple gaze upon the reality outside of ourselves, and which we await.

Of course, the difficulty comes whenever I must walk in darkness, and cannot seem to make contact with God or his guidance. In looking beyond myself I see only stormy clouds, a raging sea, a nocturnal expanse that stirs uncertainty and fear in me, even as it invites deeper trust and a more radical expectation. Here faith is tested, as it must sink even deeper both into the hidden recesses of my own heart and dispositions as well as into the heart of God, the anchor of faith, even when his presence and guidance and consolation is neither seen nor felt. Faith, after all, is a substantial reality—the very life of God poured into me—and it continues to operate within me as God’s own loving presence even when I cannot feel it or make conscious contact with it. Just as I remain the same person who I am even when I am asleep, so too when faith seems to slumber God still holds me in it, as long as I allow myself to be held. The Song of Songs expresses this beautifully: “I slept, but my heart was awake” (Sg 5:2).

Joseph fulfills these words wonderfully. His heart was ever awake, ever docile and receptive to God’s voice, to his guidance, and above all to his love, silently pouring forth into the universe, sustaining all things in existence, and permeating everything with immeasurable light and radiant beauty. Even in the obscurity of the night of this world marked by sin, afflicted by evil and suffering, and subject to death, God’s love is still present, and seeks to make itself ever more present, as it spreads forth from the heart of the Incarnate Son of God, the heart of the Paschal Christ, to touch, heal, and renew all things unto their definitive re-creation and consummation in the embrace of the Trinity.

Perhaps this is precisely how we cannot approach the words of prophecy

quoted by Matthew: “He shall be called a Nazarene.” There is no explicit place in Scripture that says this. It seems most likely to be a reference to Isaiah 11: “A shoot shall spring from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom.” The word for “shoot” or “branch” is *nezer*, from which derives the name of the town, Nazareth: “Branch-Town” or “The Town of the Shoot.” How does this tie in with our reflections on faith? It is because *every town can be a Nazareth, and every one of us can be a Joseph, a Mary*. In a world that looks to have lost the presence of God, to have seen the collapse of his promises—just as the dynastic line of David during the first century appeared to be all but destroyed—the deep roots of grace continue to grow and twist under the surface, continually breaking forth and becoming visible in branches that bear fruit.

Indeed, Jesus spoke of himself as the vine of which we are the branches, grafted into him by grace such that we live by his very life, by the very sap of love that has received from the Father. Thus as the Father, in begetting his eternal Son, has granted the Son to have life in himself—and has granted this to him even at the heart of his incarnate humanity—so too through this union with Christ, we live by the very life of the Father present in the Son. Though our first parents chose to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the beginning, and thus caused a rift that fractures our world throughout time, like cracks in parched earth or crevices caused by the earthquake of sin, God is greater: the river of the water of life still flows, secret but true, through all things, and seeks to be welcomed by the receptive, restful, and trustful human heart. Indeed, the roots of the Tree of Life, once ignored and yet planted at the heart of creation once again in the Cross of Jesus Christ, spread throughout the universe, strong and sure “like a tree planted near the stream” (Ps 1:3), and this Tree continues to burst forth in sapling and fruit in the lives of all of those who accept its loving invitation.

Let us allow God to make his Nazareth also in us. Let us enter into the sacred space shared by the Holy Family in that first Nazareth, into the intimate communion of the father, mother, and child—Joseph, Mary, and Jesus—that reflects and shares in the very eternal intimacy of the Trinity. In doing so we will receive again the succulent fruit of the Tree of Life, the gift of God in Jesus Christ, and, through the heart of our union with him, shall enter into the very mystery of the inmost life of God who is Love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

DAY 28
THE MARRIAGE OF MARY AND JOSEPH

I would now like to shift our reflections and to begin to unfold the inner nature of the union of Mary and Joseph, so that it may become contemporary with us, and not a mere memory or inaccessible ideal. I want to draw near, and to allow it to draw near, so that we may recognize that the love shared between the earthly parents of Jesus Christ was a fully human love, truly intimate. Only in letting it approach us in this way can we truly allow it to have a vivid effect on our lives, our experience, and our manner of relating to one another, whatever our particular vocation may be.

Let us, therefore, begin to plunge our hearts and minds into the beauty mystery of the *virginal marriage* of Mary and Joseph, which was the God-ordained cradle for the conception, birth, and early life of his Incarnate Son, Jesus Christ.* By looking to the Holy Family, the Church in miniature, we can see the lines drawn for the path of each one of us, regardless of the specifics of our vocation. For the ultimate call we share is the same, each one of us: to participate in the love and intimacy of the Trinity in the whole of our being. And this communion is not merely a matter of prayer, though it is rooted in prayer, born of prayer, and held by prayer, but indeed effects the union, the marriage, of both human intimacy and divine intimacy. Therefore, I want to emphasize that this great call and destiny for all of us—begun already in this life and fulfilled completely in the next—while revealed uniquely in each one of us, in all the incomparable contours of our life, nonetheless remains a single mystery, born from the white-hot light of the Trinity and returning there anew.

Let me begin by quoting some words from John Paul II. He says:

In the life of an authentically Christian community, the attitudes and the values proper to the one and the other state—that is, to the one and the other essential and conscious choice as the vocation for one’s whole earthly life and in the perspective of the “heavenly Church”—*complete each other and in some sense interpenetrate*. Perfect conjugal love must be marked by the faithfulness and the gift to the one and only Bridegroom [Christ] (and also by the faithfulness and gift of the Bridegroom to the one and only Bride) on which religious profession and priestly celibacy are based. In sum, the nature of the one as well as the other love is “spousal,” that is, expressed through the complete gift of self. The one as well as the other tends to express that spousal meaning of

*The following six reflections have been taken (and slightly adapted) from my book *At the Heart of the Gospel: The Love in Whom All Lines Converge*. Because these words came at the time of a particular fullness of reflection, it did not seem necessary or fruitful to rewrite the same things again. I hope that they will deepen our understanding of the beauty and significance of the Holy Family for our own daily lives, for the fulfillment of our most intimate aspirations in this world, and unto eternity.

the body, which has been inscribed “from the beginning” in the personal structure of man and woman. (TOB 78:4)

This short passage from the *Theology of the Body* needs some unpacking, as its abstract, theological language can tend to be rather opaque. The concepts that the pope uses are rather specialized, and their concrete, experiential meaning is not clarified, so the practical implications of his statements are not clear. I will attempt to walk through this mystery to express it with more “common sense” clarity, to try and unveil the beauty of the mystery of which he speaks. And I will do so more by direct contemplation of the reality than by reliance on his text (though I will do this too). But let me start by noting two fundamental points that he *does* make in the text. 1) He says that both virginity and marriage intersect in living and manifesting the same mystery, namely, the mystery of the Bridegroom and Bride, of Christ and the Church. Thus, they are both innately *spousal* vocations—meaning the complete gift of self—even if they manifest this differently. 2) And both of these vocations live this mystery, not divorced from the full richness of our humanity, but precisely in it and on the basis of it, particularly on the basis of the spousal/unitive meaning of the body as designed by God “from the beginning,” in other words, from the start of creation in our bodiliness as man and woman.

Specifically, John Paul affirms the need for marriage to be rooted in, and to lead to, *the direct relation of each spouse with the one true Bridegroom, Christ, and to their spousal receptivity to him*. Thus the “horizontal” spousal relationship, of human husband and wife, is oriented towards the “vertical,” and finds its meaning in expressing, manifesting, and fostering this reality of *union with Christ* in the experience of both spouses. To say this is also to say that marriage, of its very essence, is meant to have an inner *virginal character*. It is to be a re-affirmation and deepening of the meaning of original solitude—as the incomparable relationship of each singular person with God—in the context of the living of the original unity of both persons. In other words, the unity of the spouses is meant to propel them both deeper into the solitude of intimacy with God, without taking them away from communion with each other, but rather safeguarding and deepening this communion in turn.

And this occurs quite spontaneously precisely when the communion of persons is authentic, when it is born of an authentic encounter of mutual affirmation. For to affirm the beloved person does not mean to possess them, to use them, or to cling to them as my own, but rather to cherish them gratuitously in their uniqueness—simply because they are worthy of this response—and to seek their authentic good in the sight of God. Only within this pure affirmation of person for person can a healthy intimacy, a true “becoming one,” also occur. This intimacy is held by, and flows from, the primal recognition of the dignity of each person by the other as someone chosen by eternal Love, someone destined to eternal spousal union with the heavenly Bridegroom, someone in whom the living image of the Bride-Church lives. The horizontal union of man and woman that flowers in this place of mutual affirmation, therefore, is but a gratuitous fruit, a

pure outflow and expression, of this love of God for each person, in which the two persons participate. In a word, the union of human persons in truth and love manifests God's abundant generosity, in that he is pleased not only to create them for himself, but also to entrust them to one another, that they may thus, in their love, tenderness, and communion, image and incarnate his love in the sacred space of their interpersonal relationship.

If marriage proves to be a path towards the restoration of original solitude through the experience of original unity (and the nakedness that makes unity possible), then we can say that, in a certain way, the trajectory of virginity goes in the other direction. It is a movement into a particular solitude with and for God—a direct and unmediated surrender to him as one's only Bridegroom—which precisely in this way also makes possible a deeper experience of unity with others, of true and intimate personal communion on the human level. But of course the heart of virginity and its end goal is not primarily communion with other human persons, but communion with the divine Bridegroom, with the Trinity himself! The horizontal dimension, obviously, is secondary to this, though it is also essential to the full living of our humanity within this world. John Paul says as much, when he says that virginity is “an invitation to *solitude for God*” which makes possible “a new and even *fuller form of intersubjective communion with others*” (TOB 77:1-2; cf. also 68:4). And this solitude does not mean aloneness or isolation, or a rejection of the innate desires and capacities of our nature, but rather their healing, super-affirmation, and transfiguration by grace. This is clear in the repeated insistence of the pope that this call to continence for the kingdom “respects at the same time both the ‘dual nature of humanity’ (that is, its masculinity and femininity) and also that *dimension of the communion of existence that is proper to the person*” (TOB 77:1). In a word, both paths, both vocations, mature along the lines provided by “the image and likeness of God,” meaning that they are ways of living the spousal meaning of the body as gift oriented towards communion (cf. 80:6).

Both vocations manifest all three “original experiences” of solitude, nakedness, and unity in an inseparable interrelationship, and allow them to grow to full maturity and complete expression. And these three experiences are lived in and through the body, and not divorced from it, such that one experiences one's inalienable dignity as a child of God incarnate in one's unique flesh (solitude), one experiences one's orientation towards intimacy precisely in the concreteness of one's gendered being (nakedness), and one experiences the living joy of communion and relation precisely in and through the body and its unitive meaning (unity). Both vocations, marriage and virginity, are therefore incarnate expressions of love, in the whole of life and in each moment of life, and are meant to be filled with the tangible experience of *loving and being loved in the body*. This is the very stuff of which the living image of God is made.

WEEK V

Coming Around
Again

DAY 29

THE FULFILLMENT OF THE THREE RELATIONSHIPS

If the essence of the celibate vocation is truly *the spousal gift of self to God*, then the result of this is not a “hemming in” of our nature and our desire and capacity for intimacy, but precisely its most profound transfiguration, expansion, and fulfillment. This radical primacy of God, in which one’s whole humanity—one’s whole psychosomatic subjectivity—is given to him as a spousal gift precisely through the choice of virginity, is meant to lead to discovery of even deeper capacities in this very subjectivity than those based merely on nature, while fulfilling nature. It is meant to lead to a rediscovery of the spousal meaning of the body, not merely in its natural and temporal meaning (though this must also be affirmed and allowed to live in order to be taken up into the transfiguring space of grace), but in the manner proper to the virginal state of the new creation.

Thus, even as virginity includes a renunciation (of natural marriage and sexual consummation), this renunciation is authentic only insofar as it bears within itself, and makes possible, a super-affirmation (cf. TOB 81:3). And this super-affirmation is precisely a confirmation of all that has been given by God “from the beginning” in our rich nature as male and female, and in our call to intimacy in the body. It thus consists not in a distancing from masculinity and femininity, nor even in a distancing from the awareness of the spousal and unitive capacity inherent in our bodies, but rather in bringing this very capacity back, in some way, to its original virginal meaning. Something of the state of innocence proper to the Garden of Eden, in other words, is recaptured: something of the original integrity of the body in total belonging to God, and of the purity and transparency of the relation between the sexes that occurs in this place. John Paul, indeed, confirms that marriage itself seeks precisely this rediscovery of the virginal value of the body of man and woman, so that, even in their sexual gift to one another, they taste something of God’s virginal intentions for them (taste something of the original purity in which spousal unity and total virginal belonging to God were not mutually exclusive). (See TOB 10:2.) If this is true of marriage, then the same is true of virginity; but it goes about it in a more direct and radical way, by renouncing the natural expression of sexual union, tied in as it is with this passing world as an image and sacrament of the love of Bridegroom and Bride, and immersing itself directly in the Source, Reality, and Consummation of all love and intimacy.

And here, gathered together in the integrity of the spousal gift of self to God, the meaning of the body is expressed and fulfilled, not only ontologically but experientially (even if it also abides in a certain “tension” between time and eternity, as, of course, does marriage). The spousal or unitive meaning of the body is fulfilled precisely because it becomes a gift oriented towards intimacy—a gift to God in an unconditional and total bridal love. And this bridal/spousal love also bears in itself, and realizes, the capacity for paternal or maternal fruitfulness, and the living of parenthood in all of

its richness, not in the natural way of procreation and the raising of children, but in the beauty of spiritual parenthood (cf. TOB 78:5).

+ + +

Yes, in the light of this, we can expand these reflections even further. For in virginity not only are the original experiences of solitude, nakedness, and unity deepened precisely in being transfigured. The corresponding relationships that are primal to our human experience in this life are also not rejected or set aside, but rather fulfilled in another way, different but no less real. I refer primarily to the three relationships that mark the trajectory of every human life: 1) childhood, 2) spoushood, and 3) parenthood. Here the term “spousal meaning” of the body acquires its true depth, precisely in becoming more richly nuanced, referring to *so much more* than the specifically spousal/sexual/procreative capacity. This will hopefully become clear in what follows. Let me say first that these three primal relationships mark out the path of the unitive meaning of the earthly body in its God-designed beauty, in its specific depth and richness. They mark out the path from identity, through the vulnerable gift of self, into intimacy, and also the expansive fruitfulness of this intimacy.

1) They express the innate “filial” nature of our bodiliness as pure dependence upon the goodness and love of the heavenly Father, mediated in and through our earthly parents and others who manifest his paternal/maternal love. 2) They express the “spousal” nature of our bodiliness as gift oriented towards intimacy, as a gift that is meant to be total, reciprocal, and indissoluble, bringing about the intersubjectivity of persons in a single life in which two distinct subjects become one without ceasing to be distinct. 3) Finally, they express the “parental” nature of our bodiliness as transparency to the creative, cherishing, protecting, nourishing, and caring love of God who is the origin and fulfillment of fatherhood and motherhood, all creativity. Now, if these three dimensions of our bodily capacity for relationship are understood at an adequate depth, how could we possibly think that only natural marriage and procreation realizes them, and not, in a different but no less profound way, does virginity? Rather, marriage realizes on the level of nature and in the trajectory of history what virginity super-realizes in the light of eternity and on the basis of the eternal consummation that awaits us at the end of time, when marriage and procreation will pass away.

I hopefully gave a glimpse of this earlier in my words on the virginal marriage of Mary and Joseph. They lived all the rich fabric of natural relationship, and yet did so with a particular depth and transparency to the inner Trinitarian nature of all communion. And they did so precisely because their love was *virginal*, that is, totally given to God in the commitment to “continence for the kingdom of heaven” (cf. Mt 19:12), a continence that did not draw them *away* from each other, but rather opened up a path of even deeper drawing-close, of even more profound intimacy and communion, not on the basis of the normal trajectory of marriage, sexual intercourse, and procreation, but on the basis of their joint belonging to God in unconditional surrender, and their cherishing custodianship of the virginal

mystery of the other before God.

For here the second and third capacities for relationship, namely the spousal and parental—rooted wholly in the first, in the filial belonging to God—are surrendered to God alone so as to be realized directly by him in participation in his own divine life. Thus Mary becomes bride before God in a special way, such that she images and realizes in herself the mystery of the entire bridal Church, in which we all participate. And, as bride, she also becomes mother, she becomes the mother of Christ and the mother of all believers, who are born of the union of compassion and love forged between her and Christ in the total reciprocal self-gift of the Passion and Resurrection.

But Joseph is in no way excluded from this transfiguration of the beauty of relationship in God. There has throughout history been a tendency to do so—out of a fear of casting Mary and Joseph's virginity into question. John Paul, among others, has spoken against this fear, and has spoken very strongly for the importance of taking Joseph's truly intimate communion with Mary and Jesus into account. For he is *truly* a spouse of Mary, even if virginally, just as he is *truly* a father to Christ, even if not biologically. As John Paul affirmed in an audience of August 21, 1996:

It may be presumed that at the time of their betrothal there was an understanding between Joseph and Mary about the plan to live as a virgin. Moreover, the Holy Spirit...was quite able to instill in Joseph the ideal of virginity as well. ... Joseph and Mary received the grace of living both the charism of virginity and the gift of marriage. ... The difficulty of accepting the sublime mystery of their spousal communion has led some, since the second century, to think of Joseph as advanced in age and to consider him Mary's guardian more than her husband. It is instead a case of supposing that he was not an elderly man at the time, but that his interior perfection, the fruit of grace, led him to live his spousal relationship with Mary with virginal affection.

What a beautiful and illumining passage this is! Yes, it is precisely the context of virginity that creates the space for the marriage of Mary and Joseph to exist. Virginity becomes a new *atmosphere of love* in which God can draw hearts together. Virginity becomes a new atmosphere of love in which, precisely through the total belonging of each person to God, he can also give and entrust them to one another with particular depth and transparency to his own life as Trinity. In the living-space of virginity, he invites them to participate in his life, both directly in their virginal relation to him, as well as in the rich fabric of their interpersonal relationship with each other. This is how the Holy Family becomes a kind of convergence point, the convergence point in which the vocations of marriage and virginity intersect. For here all the capacities of our nature, fashioned in God's image, are transfigured and fulfilled, not on the basis of our natural biological capacity for sexual union and procreation (as sacred and beautiful as this is!), but on the basis of *the total self-gift of each person to God, and also the total self-gift of persons to one another in God and through God.*

DAY 30
WHERE MARRIAGE AND VIRGINITY CONVERGE

In the Liturgy, Mary is celebrated as “united to Joseph, the just man, by a bond of marital and virginal love.” There are really two kinds of love here, both of which together represent the mystery of the Church—virgin and spouse—as symbolized in the marriage of Mary and Joseph. “Virginity or celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God not only does not contradict the dignity of marriage but presupposes and confirms it. Marriage and virginity are two ways of expressing and living the one mystery of the Covenant of God with his people,” the Covenant which is a communion of love between God and human beings. (*Redemptoris Custos*, n. 20)

As I said earlier, the horizontal spousal dimension of love, in virginity, is subsumed wholly into the vertical, such that natural spousal consummation is renounced for the sake of a total spousal “yes” to God. This lies at the core of the marriage of Mary and Joseph—that each is a virgin given to God—and yet does not in that way take away the spousal bond between them. Rather, it transforms its nature from being a natural imaging, in the ordinary “language” of sexual union, of the gift of Bridegroom and Bride, to being a *mutual entrustment of the virginal mystery of each to the other*, such that each person becomes the “custodian” of the other’s mystery in God and for God. This is what it means that the words “My sister, my bride,” in virginity, become, “My sister, *his* bride.” And this is actually a deeper transparency—I am inclined to say a deeper joy—than saying, “my bride,” for here the very disinterestedness of being the custodian of the other person’s mystery in God and for God does not exclude the experience of interpersonal human intimacy, but re-establishes it on another level.

It re-establishes our capacity for intimacy, not on the natural spousal relation, but on the virginal consummation of this relation in the light of eternity, anticipated already now, in which the “virginal state” of our body will be restored and fulfilled as the perpetual fulfillment of the spousal meaning of the body in its entirety. In other words, the spousal word spoken between man and woman—the word of total reciprocal self-gift, “I am yours, and you are mine”—is spoken now in a virginal way, and precisely as virginal fulfills the spousal word in anticipation of the virginal consummation of eternity. (For in eternity, in the eternal virginal state of the body, this spousal word will be spoken between *all* human persons in the likeness of the eternal “Yes” of the Trinity.) At the heart of their natural marriage, this is precisely the mystery that Mary and Joseph lived.*

*If the spousal gift of self to God constitutes the essence of virginity, how could Mary and Joseph be *both* virginal and also spouses to one another? This question helps to illumine a beautiful dimension of virginity as it transfigures human love: it does not take away anything from the depth of human love and closeness, but

But that is not all. For each one of us, according to our state in life and our unique personal story, is called to live and manifest this same beautiful reality. If married, our natural married life and parenthood is invited to share in the transparency and purity of the virginal love and intimacy of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, as well as in the expansiveness of their love as it spreads out to bear fruit for the sake of the entire world. If in virginity, our total gift to God is meant to flower both in a profound experience of nuptial intimacy with him as well as in a deep intersubjective communion with other human persons. And in the very context and atmosphere of virginity, we are to hear God's word of gift and entrustment, by which he invites us to share in the intimacy and totality of the "custodianship" of Mary and Joseph of one another's mystery, and in the fruitfulness of their union in God. In this regard, the words of John Paul that I quoted earlier are beautifully transparent. Let's revisit them:

I think that every man, whatever his station in life or his life's vocation, must at some point hear those words which Joseph of Nazareth once heard: "Do not be afraid to take Mary to yourself" (Mt 1:20). "Do not be afraid to take" means *do everything to recognize that gift which she is for you*. Fear only one thing: that you try to appropriate that gift. That is what you should fear. As long as she remains a gift from God himself to you, you can safely rejoice in all that she is as that gift. What is more, you ought even to do everything you can to recognize that gift, to show her how unique a treasure she is. Every man is unique. Uniqueness is not a limitation, but a window into the depths. Perhaps God wills that it be you who is the one who tells her of her inestimable worth and special beauty. If that is the case, do not be afraid of your predilection. Loving predilection is, or at least can be, participation in that eternal predilection which God had in man whom he had created. If you have grounds to fear that your predilection might become a destructive force, don't fear it in a prejudicial way. The fruits themselves will show whether your predilection is for the good.

Neither the pope nor I am saying that all persons called to virginity

rather renders it particularly transparent to the *person* and to the nature of *intimacy as lived virginally in God*. It does so, we could say, by subsuming the "spousal" word between man and woman totally into the "fraternal" or sibling (rooted in childhood in God), such that man says to woman "my sister" and not "my bride," since he is too permeated by the awareness of her belonging to God to call her this. He cannot take this mystery to himself, but can only affirm and safeguard it in God. In a word, all he can do, and all he desires to do, is to cherish her as God's bride, and to be the custodian and protector of this mystery. But in the same moment as he disinterestedly affirms the woman's mystery in God, he is also invited to participate in God's cherishing love for her, precisely in her bridal femininity, such that his spousal capacity itself is super-affirmed and transfigured precisely in this virginal entrustment and brotherly custodianship. He experiences, therefore, the fulfillment of all of his capacities for relationship—to be son, brother, friend, spouse, and father—coming to full flower and mysterious consummation precisely through radiant transformation in the living atmosphere of virginity.

should have relationships that directly resemble that of Joseph and Mary, but rather that every man and every woman is called to live *the fullness of human relationship, in all of its depth and breadth*, even and also in the life of celibacy.⁷ Those who have given their lives totally to Christ are called, and given the capacity, to live in a profound way the deepest and most transparent form of intimacy in friendship, which takes up all the richness of the various forms of relationship and, in Christ, fulfills them. After all, every human relationship, whatever its nature, finds its full flowering in friendship; even marriage is but a particular form of friendship. As Christ indicated: “I no longer call you servants, but friends, for all that I have heard from my Father, I have made known to you” (Jn 15:15). Yes, for God, friendship *is* intimacy, and yet it is also the sacrificial gift of self; it is both *agape* and *eros*. “For no one has greater love than this, to lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13).

Here the true richness of human relationship is unveiled, and its astounding depth: how deeply rooted it is in the very inner secret of the life of God, and also how deeply it is rooted in the singular beauty of each human heart. It manifests the expansiveness of Christ’s self-surrender in his Eucharist and his Passion, in which he lays down his life for all humanity, humanity estranged by sin and death, in order to draw us back together into the intimacy and communion of the divine life. It also manifests his tender presence to each singular person in the contours of intimate encounter, and his close communion with those who, drawn by the magnetism of his love and the goodness of his Heart, shared his daily life with him in the humblest and most simple of ways. Yes, all love, to the degree that it is mature—and according to the unique call of God in a given moment and given circumstances, from the intimacy of husband and wife, to the pastoral ministry and paternal presence of a priest, to the communion of religious brothers and sisters in community, to the very laying down of life of a martyr—shares in the same dynamic walked by Christ in his Incarnation, Life, Passion, and Resurrection.

If this is true, then the path of celibacy is not a renunciation of the deep human capacity for interpersonal communion, of the deep aspiration for a

⁷To say that all celibate persons need not directly mirror the life of Mary and Joseph, but nonetheless live the same mystery of virginal fulfillment, is to say that the inner essence of love and intimacy that was realized in their relationship is also realized in each person’s life, though according to its own incomparable contours and unique story written by God. There is, however, a particular vocation that *does* reflect and share in the mystery of Mary and Joseph, and which manifests precisely the convergence of the vocations of marriage and virginity in the sphere of a joint belonging of both persons to God: it is what is traditionally termed a “Josephite marriage.” This vocation, though quite rare and calling for a deep maturity on the part of both persons, is also a gift for the whole Church, as it makes visible precisely the inner core of *both* vocations and also their intersection in the single call to personal love and intimacy in the likeness of the Trinity. It shows and expresses, in other words, the inner core of what marriage is meant to be—namely, the rediscovery, in both man and woman, of the virginal state of the body—as well as the inner core of virginity—the experience of most profound intimacy with God, and, in and through God, with other persons, incomparable and irreplaceable.

profound and total love, but a specific way of realizing it in the light of the eternal state of virginal love that awaits us in the new creation, and which has already been inaugurated now through Christ. Here, again, marriage and continence flow together in a single mystery, and what matters is precisely that we surrender to that mystery—the mystery of the love of the Trinity incarnate in Christ Crucified and Risen—and live it with every beat of our heart, with every instant of our life, loving him who loved us, and, in being loved and loving before our God, to also live authentic love before each one of our brothers and sisters.

Thus, if we have been called to embrace continence for the kingdom of heaven, we should not be afraid to love, to love deeply and tenderly, according to the full richness of our humanity, in a chaste and virginal way: with our eyes always on the unique and incomparable beauty and dignity of each person, which is the wellspring of all authentic love. There are multiform ways in which such chaste relationships flower: in the context of a community ministering together and also spending time in the joy of their shared life; in the deepening and purification of the natural bonds of family; in persons whose lives intersect in any number of ways, in shared studies or interests, in the shared burden of pain and suffering, in the providential intersection of hearts in the plan of God; and in so many other ways, according to the beautiful uniqueness and profound richness of God's love for each person and his delight in bringing his children together in his love.

This flowers in a particularly beautiful way in relationships of profound entrustment, in which the spousal gift of self to God, total and unconditional, also opens one's being to receive and care for others in the name of God and for his sake, and to experience a new and profound form of intimacy with them. It includes the "crystallization" of the gift of self, which is given in a universal way for the good of the entire Church, into singular and incomparable relationships between two persons, in which what is general becomes particular, what is universal becomes specific. (And this is not only a "giving" of oneself to love others, but also the willingness to let oneself be loved too!) This is the path of love and communion between singular human hearts, which flowers in our lives in addition to the universal love for all of our brothers and sisters which Christ begets within us. Both are necessary: the love in which we live, with Christ, the mystery of his "laying down his life for the Church" (cf. Eph 5), for all of the children of God, but also the mystery in which this universal love is distilled into singular, unrepeatable relationships between two human hearts, and, precisely in this way, becomes most fully concrete.

DAY 31
MARY AND JOSEPH'S COVENANT
IN MARRIAGE AND CONTINENCE

I hope that I have made more vividly apparent the profound intersection between the vocations of marriage and virginity, of continence for the kingdom of heaven and the natural way of sexual union and procreation. Both are paths of the *communio personarum* (communion of persons), and both, from the heart of this intimacy, are fruitful. This is what constitutes the core of each vocation, even if they both manifest this mystery differently. The marriage of Joseph and Mary is the first and fullest blossoming of the holy married state as well as the first expression of virginity in Christian history. John Paul II says as much, indicating that the marriage of Mary and Joseph was a kind of “sanctuary” in which a mystery greater than natural marriage dwelt: the mystery of virginal intimacy proper to eternity, and indeed the very nuptial union between God and humanity, Bridegroom and Bride, in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. The communion existing between Joseph and Mary, therefore, was a virginal communion, and yet one which did not contradict the truthfulness of their marriage, but rather fulfilled it—indeed super-fulfilled it—in an unexpected and supernatural way.

Christopher West summarizes John Paul’s words on this matter quite well:

Earthly continence for the kingdom “is a sign that the body, whose end is not death, tends toward glorification; already by this very fact,” John Paul says, Christian celibacy is “a testimony among men that anticipates the future resurrection” (TOB 75:1). In this state, men and women no longer marry—not because the deep truth of marriage is deleted, but because the sacrament is fulfilled in the eternal reality of Christ’s union with the Church. In this sense, those who are celibate for the kingdom are “skipping” the sacrament in anticipation of the real thing. They wish to participate in a more direct way—here and now—in the “marriage of the Lamb.”

John Paul says that the person “who consciously chooses such continence chooses in some sense a particular *participation in the mystery of the redemption (of the body)*; he wishes to complete it in a particular way in his own flesh (see Col 1:24).” In doing so, the celibate person finds a distinctive “imprint of a likeness with Christ,” who himself was continent for the kingdom (TOB 76:3). The Pope observes that the departure from the Old Testament tradition, in which marriage and procreation were a religiously privileged state, had to be based on the example of Christ himself. From the moment of his virginal conception, Christ’s whole earthly life, in fact, was a witness to a new kind of fruitfulness

[and a new kind of intimacy]. This mystery, however, remained hidden from those to whom Christ first spoken about continence for the kingdom. The Pope points out that only “Mary and Joseph, who lived the mystery of his birth, became the first witnesses of a fruitfulness different from that of the flesh, that is, the fruitfulness of the Spirit: ‘What is begotten in her comes from the Holy Spirit’ (Mt 1:20)” (TOB 75:2). The miracles surrounding Christ’s virgin birth would only gradually be revealed to the eyes of the Church on the basis of Matthew and Luke’s Gospels.

John Paul remarks that although Christ “is born from her like every man...still Mary’s motherhood was virginal; and to this virginal motherhood corresponded the virginal mystery of Joseph” (TOB 75:2). Joseph’s and Mary’s virginity is certainly in keeping with that continence for the kingdom that Christ will one day announce to his disciples. However, at the same time, they were a legitimate husband and wife.’ As John Paul says: “*The marriage of Mary with Joseph...conceals within itself, at the same time, the mystery of the perfect communion of persons, of Man and Woman in the conjugal covenant and at the same time the mystery of this singular ‘continence for the kingdom of heaven’: a continence that served the most perfect ‘fruitfulness of the Holy Spirit’ in the history of salvation. Indeed,*” the Pope continues, “it was in some way the absolute fullness of that spiritual fruitfulness, because precisely in...Mary and Joseph’s covenant in marriage and continence, the gift of the Incarnation of the Eternal Word was realized” (TOB 75:3).

In a profound paradox that simultaneously embraces the heavenly marriage (i.e. continence for the kingdom) and the earthly marriage, Joseph and Mary’s virginal communion of persons literally effected the marriage of heaven and earth. This is the grace of the hypostatic union—the marriage of the human and divine natures in the Person of Christ. This grace is connected precisely with the absolute fullness of the spiritual fruitfulness that comes from embracing continence for the kingdom. John Paul concludes that every man and woman who authentically embraces continence for the kingdom in some way participates in this superabounding spiritual fruitfulness.

We see here a confirmation of everything that we have spoken about until this point. Truly, the choice for virginity or, in the pope’s terms, continence for the kingdom of heaven, is a particular insertion of one’s being into the mystery of the redemption of the body. It is a way of anticipating already now in this life the virginal way of living and loving proper to eter-

*For those interested in the finer points of Canon Law, the Church teaches that a couple must be capable of consummating their marriage at the time they enter marriage (see canon 1084), but they are not absolutely obligated to consummate their marriage. [Footnote from Christopher West.] (Christopher West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, 337-339.)

nity—a way opened up precisely in and through Christ, who was himself a virgin and who, by his Paschal Mystery, made possible a human participation in this virginal way of love, based in the Resurrection and the new creation, and, ultimately, in the very manner of life and love proper to the Trinity. And yet even before Christ himself, Joseph and Mary lived in virginity, a virginity freely chosen and yet protected in the context of their spousal covenant in marriage.

Here, at the origin of virginity as a state of life, marriage is present, even as all those who embrace continence throughout history come forth from the sanctuary of marriage, from the creative love of man and woman. But in the opposite direction, the true and deepest meaning of marriage is revealed and safeguarded precisely in virginity, in the eternally definitive state of communion that will endure whenever marriage and procreation have ceased. This, too, we see in Mary and Joseph: their life is a perfect union of *both* marriage *and* virginity. This is what John Paul means when he says that “*The marriage of Mary with Joseph...conceals within itself, at the same time, the mystery of the perfect communion of persons, of Man and Woman in the conjugal covenant,*” namely, the true communion of mutual self-giving that constitutes marriage, “and at the same time the mystery of this *singular ‘continence for the kingdom of heaven’*,” namely, the mystery of virginity in unconditional spousal surrender to God, and in the custodianship of the other person’s mystery in the sight of God.

The pope also summarizes this rather lengthy sentence in a much shorter phrase, and a very beautiful one. In other words, he simply calls it “Mary and Joseph’s covenant in marriage and continence.” These two dimensions of their covenant are distinct and yet inseparable, the union of the marital and the virginal, in the fabric of a single life and a single home. And what is the significance of this? It means that the very *communio personarum*, the communion of persons between man and woman, is raised beyond the level of the temporal sacrament and comes to participate directly in the eternal Mystery that is its origin and fulfillment. And yet in this way it is not dissolved, but rather consummated; it is consummated not through natural intercourse, but through the total spousal surrender of each person, man and woman, to God, and expressed also through their care for one another’s whole psychosomatic being, namely, in the “custodianship” of one another’s virginal mystery.

Here the original experiences of solitude, nakedness, and unity are realized and fulfilled in a different but no less real way than in natural marriage; indeed, they are realized in a more profound and transparent way on the basis of the grace of the redemption of the body flowing from the Paschal Mystery of Christ. Thus we could even say that, just as the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary was a gift given to her in view of the coming Passion and Resurrection of her Son, so the virginal marriage of Joseph and Mary was given in view of his coming Incarnation, and, indeed, in view of the virginal consummation of love and intimacy that was inaugurated through the whole of his life from conception to ascension. In a particular way, it was a participation in the Paschal Mystery, in the Eu-

charist, Passion, and Resurrection. For it is here, in the virginal Body of Christ himself given as a gift to the Church, and to each child of God, that virginity or continence finds its fulfillment and its clearest expression.

And the mystery that Mary lived with Joseph throughout their life, in the union of marriage and continence, was realized before the Bridegroom-Christ at the end of his life, in the union of continence and marriage. And both events, both expressions, were forms of that total chaste surrender of self to God, which brings about a spiritual fruitfulness of a different order than natural fruitfulness: the first being the very cradle of the Incarnation of the Son of God, and the sanctuary of his life for the first thirty years, and the second being the very birthing of the Church and of all the children of God who will be brought forth into the life of the Trinity throughout time.

DAY 32

THE UNIVERSAL MYSTERY FOR EACH AND ALL

Each person who is called to walk the path of love participates in the great mystery of love in their own singular way, according to the unique contours of their path and their incomparable story as written by our loving God. And yet even more deeply, beyond the externals of their unique life story, as important as this is, lies the more profound singularity of their personhood, of their incomparable “I,” created by God for fulfillment in the eternal intimacy of the Trinity. Here singularity is not a limit, not defined by externals, by what is partial; it is rather but an incarnation of the fullness. It is the living contact of the singular human heart with the Heart of Christ, and, in him, with the entire Trinity, who is the “universal singular,” who is himself the white-hot light of undivided love in the perfect communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yes, when we look deeply enough—with humility, and reverence, and receptivity—upon the unique beauty of another person, or when we allow God to look upon us in our own uniqueness, we come to realize that each person has an absolute value, comparable with no other and replaceable by nothing: a value that is a reflection of the absoluteness of God’s own love which has directly willed them, created them, and redeemed them to find fulfillment in the shelter of his own intimate embrace.

This is reflected and incarnated in all the concrete details of our life in this world—in the way of living we have chosen in response to God’s invitation, in the network of relationships in which we are enfolded, in the multitude of sacramental experiences by which God remains in contact with us, from the simple whisper of wind in the trees to the breath of deep prayer and the sacramental life of the Church. And yet it also surpasses all of these details, not in a way that leaves behind our uniqueness as a person but rather sinks down to its deepest origin, safeguard, and fulfillment in the unmediated embrace of the Trinity. Here, in the living contact of faith, hope, and love, our personhood makes contact with the mystery of eternity, with a foretaste of the consummation that awaits at the end of time, when, so permeated by the self-communication of the Trinity and by the joy of his intimacy, we will be utterly absorbed in him who is our eternal happiness. And here also the true order of all relationships, of all things, is revealed in its deepest essence, not based on externals or roles or even the specific contours in which they are expressed, but in the pure transparency of person and person, of child of God and child of God, within the transparency of the love and communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Yes, and it is precisely from this place and in this place—this place of gratuitous affirmation of the uniqueness of each person—that all the other details of life, all the manifold expressions of love and relationship proper to this world, find their meaning and their beauty, and can be lived in freedom, spontaneity, and a spirit of childlike playfulness. It is indeed quite

beautiful how the single mystery of virginal love revealed first in the union of Mary and Joseph, and most fully in the gift of Christ himself, in whom the white-hot light of the Trinity's inner life is opened before us, is refracted in so many diverse colors in the lives and relationships of individual persons throughout history, and yet always leads back to this place of white-hot light in pure gratuitous intimacy once again. Indeed, there is no place for comparison, no place for weighing better or worse except in terms of the innate transparency of love to the mystery of the Trinity. And this lies not so much in the particular state of life or the specific contours in which this state is lived, but in the love of the heart manifested in the body and in the whole of existence. Whether in a natural marriage or in virginity, whether in a single consecrated life or in a Josephite marriage or in the religious life, the one and only mystery of the Trinity's inner life, and of the union of Christ and the Church, is made present, allowing us to participate in it.

What matters is simply that we receive the gift and live it. And I don't mean primarily the gift of our own unique vocation (though this finds its place within it), but the *single gift that gives meaning to all other gifts*: the gift of God's own gratuitous grace, drawing us to participate in his inner life of love as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is also, thus, the gift of profound loving relationship and mature intimacy with other human persons, founded in our very sharing in the manner of life proper to the Trinity, which has become present within this world through Christ, Crucified and Risen. Indeed, when the divine life first burst forth into the visible world in its full, white-hot light, it did so in the simplest and most humble way: in the virginal-marital bond of a man and a woman, and in the Child virginally conceived of her. Here the image of God in the union of man, woman, and child was restored and fulfilled in a way deeper and more transparent than in Adam and Eve, for their union shared fully in the likeness of the Trinity through the redeeming powers of grace.

And this union of divine love and human love, of divine intimacy and human intimacy, radiated out to touch other human hearts—indeed to permeate the entire universe in its every fiber—in the same simplicity, littleness, and humility that characterized it in its first beginning. For the loving Christ lived a life that was utterly humble, simple, and ordinary, such that it is difficult to find anything in it that would cause the earth-shattering transformations that occurred in history in the centuries following his death (transformations that are occurring until this very day!). That is, it is difficult to find such significance on the surface, without looking deeply, without opening one's heart to be touched and ravished by the breathtaking beauty of God's love made manifest within him.

He lived for thirty years hidden away in a tiny town in a small province of the Roman Empire, doing humble manual labor as a carpenter and, as people thought, a carpenter's son. After these thirty years he was baptized in a muddy river by an eccentric preacher who wore camel's hair and ate honey and locusts; and then he spent forty years in the desert praying. And then he emerged and began to travel around the province, speaking to the

people and teaching them wherever he could find a hearing: in synagogues, on the plains, on the mountains, and even on the shore of the lake as he preached from a boat. And he began to gather a band of disciples, indeed of friends, who spent three years with him in this kind of life of itinerant preaching and dependent poverty. This band consisted of both men and women, each drawing near to him and sharing his life, and also ministering to him in ways that beautifully manifested their complementarity as man and woman. Twelve of these men Jesus chose as “apostles,” in other words, those whom he sent out to extend his loving care for others in his name; and there were others, too, a larger number, who did similarly.

But if we read the Gospel accounts with open eyes, and do so without prejudice or a plan to doubt from the outset, we are immediately struck that this profound littleness is also pervaded by an atmosphere of indescribable greatness, depth, and beauty. This humble man and his humble companions worked wonders of healing, bringing sight to the blind, hearing and speech to the deaf, health to the lepers and the ill, and even life to those who had died. And his teaching, so ordinary and in such plain language, had a unique capacity to turn all the ossified and dead concepts of religious rigidity and Pharisaism of his day upside down, and to lay bare the throbbing heartbeat of human relationship with God in its pristine purity and depth. But this is not all: not only did he work miracles of healing, and not only did he teach with a mysterious authority, one that came not from book learning but from direct experience of the reality itself. No, there is much more: he himself claimed this authority directly, claimed to speak on behalf of and in the name of God himself. Indeed, little by little with ever growing explicitness, *he himself claimed to be God*, claimed to be the only-begotten Son of the eternal Father who came into this world to save humanity!

And as God, he drew near to human hearts and walked with them on the paths of life. He shared time with them, shared meals and relationship and suffering and hunger and work, and family life and love and obscurity and joy. He himself looked out, with human eyes, across the grain fields, whispering in the gentle wind and glistening in the hot sun, and saw the creative hand of his loving Father giving all things as a gratuitous gift to humanity. He looked out over the lake, over the mountainsides, over the houses of the town, or over the very buildings of the great city of Jerusalem and its temple—and saw with the eyes of God himself. He looked upon each one of the persons whom he encountered, and looked with such tenderness, with such unique and singular love, that they felt in that gaze a love that they had always longed for. They felt the very tenderness of the eternal God pouring forth upon them in the eyes of Christ, in his voice, and in his every action and gesture. And Christ was always utterly attuned to each person in their unique struggles, their incomparable story and the unrepeatable dignity which cried out within them to be recognized, affirmed, embraced, and set free. And this he did, as God and in the name of God.

But this incredible union of greatness and littleness scandalized many,

particularly those who thought that one had to be great in order to draw near to God. For here God himself claimed to be drawing near to those who were the littlest and the weakest! And so his life progressed, to his own complete knowledge—into which he gradually initiated those closest to him—towards the final days in which he would offer himself as a gift in bread and wine, and would be arrested, condemned, scourged, crowned with thorns, and crucified on a cross between two thieves. Most of his friends fled in fear after his arrest, but a few stayed: a handful of women, his own mother, and one of his disciples. They walked with him on the way of his suffering, and stood near to him as he hung upon the Cross. Yes, and here their eyes were opened to that most scandalous—and yet most utterly intelligible!—union of love and suffering, of vulnerability and intimacy. For here they saw laid before their eyes the very inner life of the Trinity: a life of total vulnerable gift which is forever consummated in the total security and joy of intimacy. They witnessed this, even if they did not yet understand it, in the serenity and peace with which the Crucified Son of God bore the immeasurable sufferings inflicted upon him, with which he joined himself to all human suffering, sin, pain, and death.

And thus they witnessed the tremendous beauty of the gift of God given in Christ: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son” (Jn 3:16). Yes, and this love—in all of its littleness, weakness, and vulnerability—proved indestructible. It proved to be the love that, as the Song of Songs says, “is stronger even than death, and more relentless than the grave” (Sg 8:6). Here the very current of the life of God—the very circulation of mutual self-giving and eternally consummated intimacy between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—flowed forth into our world through the suffering flesh of Jesus Christ! Here it poured into the hearts and bodies of those who stood at the foot of his Cross, especially of his Virgin Mother, who welcomed his as his one bride, welcomed him in her own right and for her own sake, but also, precisely in this and from this, on behalf of all humanity, pronouncing her “Yes” to this love for us and on behalf of all of us. And this profound union of Bridegroom and Bride, of Christ and the Church, of Jesus and Mary, of God and humanity, was abundantly fruitful in the immeasurable expansiveness of love, in the fecundity that can only flow forth from gratuitous intimacy.

Yes, life was born in the place of death, joy in the place of sadness, hope and peace in the place of suffering, and undying intimacy in the place of deepest loneliness and apparent isolation. For here the bond of intimacy between Father and Son in the Holy Spirit was not torn, but proved indestructible, and here the bond of union between God and humanity, which had been ruptured sin, was healed. And life poured forth. Life will continually pour forth from this amazing event—this single event in which all the lines of history converge as one a single point—permeating all of creation and every human life like surging rivers of love and joy and re-creating grace. This life, undying and victorious in the purity of the uncreated Love of God, showed itself first in the Resurrection of Christ, in which he stepped forth from the grave, radiant and full in his humanity, beyond the

boundary of death. Yes, he stepped forth, not merely into the old life that was his before his death, in the life proper to humanity in the fallen state of sin: no, he stepped forth into the wholly new existence of unbounded Love, the state of the new creation which, already realized in himself, awaits all of us as our everlasting joy at the end of time. For here all is love, all is intimacy, all is the pure vulnerability and utter security of encounter, communication, and communion.

Here all is permeated through and through by the very innermost mystery of the life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which is at work, in the humility and littleness that marks the nature of all God's activity in history, inviting the vulnerability and freedom of our response, our "yes," our reciprocal surrender of love. And as we consent to this current of the water of life that flows out to touch us, to fill us, to embrace us, we are lifted from the brokenness and fragmentation of sin, and are gradually made whole, made capable of living, in all the contours of our human and bodily life in this world, the very life and love of the Trinity. And this mystery, touching us and carrying us now, will also carry us into the definitive consummation that awaits, in which all of humanity, and the whole universe, will be taken into the inner heart of the life of God, to share forever, in face-to-face vision and unmediated embrace, in the ecstatic love and perfect intimacy of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

DAY 33 FULL CIRCLE

These reflections have led full circle to the same place as the earlier words on the Church as a true home for the human heart. I said in Day 2 that the Church is the place where God restores the intimacy, both human and divine, that was wounded by sin. We see the same to be true here and now, from a different perspective, and we learn more vividly in what consists true communion. Authentic communion, true intimacy—as we see so beautifully in the Holy Family—is always *personal*, always founded on the unique dignity and beauty of the incomparable individual, and never an anonymous mingling together of roles or forms of service in the whole and for the sake of the whole. Let me say it strongly. The Church is not the place where the individual is anonymously fitted into the abstract and ideal, the place in which the unique person is depersonalized for the sake of service, for the sake of the whole, but rather the opposite: the Church is the home in which each person is welcomed in his or her singularity into the embrace of the universal family.

Only in the context of this gratuitous love and intimacy, as we see so vividly in the family of Nazareth, the “Church in miniature,” can all the forms of service and ministry unfold. All unfolds within the tender entrustment of each person to every other, by which, as John Paul says, “every man is given to every woman, and every woman is given to every man,” and we can listen deeply, in the contours of our unique life, to the word of God inviting us to love those placed upon our path.

Let me try to tie the strands together. How have the reflections on the intersection of vocations shown the sanctity and irreplaceable dignity of each singular individual, sheltered and fulfilled precisely in the embrace of the Trinity’s communion and in the communion of all human persons in the Church? Maybe I can give the answer in the form of a question: Haven’t I been speaking precisely of *singular persons* whenever speaking of that most *universal mystery* in which each one of us, in our own singularity, is called to participate? I have spoken of Jesus, the beloved Son of the Father made flesh to be with us; I have spoken of the Virgin Mary and of Saint Joseph, and of the profound intimacy of their marital and virginal love; I have spoken of Saint Peter, who experienced his whole life pervaded by the love and mercy of Christ, and who was entrusted with protecting and caring for those whom Christ had redeemed; I have spoken of Saint John, who leaned against the Lord’s breast at the Last Supper and was entrusted to Mary (and in turn received her) as he stood at the foot of the Cross. These are all individual persons who were gratuitously loved by God incarnate in Christ, and who let their lives be swept up into the embrace of the Trinity in and through him. And we, two-thousand years later, are continuing to be drawn into loving relationship with them! They are not dead and lost. They are not forgotten. Rather, they continue to be present to us

in intimate love, as fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, and friends!

They are not abstract ideas. They are not archetypes. They are not ideals or mere examples. No, they are persons who are with us to this very day, who are close to us, accompanying us on our path through this life until we ourselves find rest in the consummation of heaven. And they are close to us because they live in the world-cradling embrace of the Church, because they live in God—“for to God all things are alive” (Lk 20:38)—and thus have entered into the sphere of universal communion that transcends time and space, while affirming, protecting, and fulfilling their unique and singular personal beauty in intimacy with the Trinity and with all persons. And they desire the same destiny, the same beautiful existence, for each one of us; and they reach out to us, they draw near to us, they give themselves to us, so that we may accept this gift of their closeness, may accept being a part of their family, and may share with them in the very joy of the uncreated Family of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for all eternity.

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How beautiful is this convergence point, how beautiful is this living space of all-embracing intimacy! Here we come to understand how truly, how deeply the Resurrection has inaugurated a new form of life at the very heart of the universe, and will carry the universe definitively into this life at the end of time. Whenever he burst the boundaries of death and passed fully into the life of God, Jesus Christ opened up an entirely new form of existence for all of humanity, indeed for the whole created order. He became the “first fruits of the resurrection” (cf. 1 Cor 15:23), the “first-born from the dead” (Col 1:18), and now, joined to him who has joined himself to us, and who breathes into us and through us the Holy Spirit, “the whole creation cries out with inexpressible groaning, as it awaits for the liberty of the children of God, the redemption of the body” (Rom 8:23).

Christ’s Body, his literal, incarnate, material Body, has become utterly permeated with the living beauty of his uncreated Person, and indeed is fully saturated with the inner life of the Most Holy Trinity, which vibrates through this Body without ceasing and without limit. Thus the Risen Body of Christ has become what the body was always meant to be; indeed, it has become the Body in which every body finds rest and fulfillment. The Body of the Son of God is the Convergence Point where all lines converge, where all restless human persons thirsting for true and definitive intimacy, and in us the whole created universe, are lifted up into the innermost embrace of the Trinity.

He is Communion. He is Love. He is an incomparably beautiful Person utterly open in acceptance of the Other and reciprocal gift of self, an openness and vulnerability, a nakedness, which is eternally sealed and consummated in perfect intimacy. His Body is a filial body: the Body of the Son. “You are my beloved Son, in whom my soul delights” (Mk 1:11). His Body is a spousal body: the Body of the Bridegroom. “He who has the bride is the Bridegroom” (Jn 3:29). His Body is a paternal body: the pure image and transparent reflection of the love of the heavenly Father. “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9).

In Christ, Incarnate, Crucified, and Risen, all the original experiences of humanity—fashioned in the image and likeness of God—are healed, restored, and super-fulfilled, and they are fulfilled precisely through being taken up into the very innermost mystery of the life of God. They are taken up into the eternal circulation of love ever occurring in the intimate space between the Father and the Son, in the living breath of love which is their one Spirit. Now solitude is utterly permeated by presence, by the mutual attentiveness and awe-filled embrace of Lover and Beloved. Now nakedness is utterly secure in the complete transparency of self-disclosure, secure because held, pervaded, and absorbed in the virginal gaze of cherishing Love. Now intimacy is consummated in utter confidence and undying constancy, in the utmost closeness that surpasses anything that a human mind or imagination can grasp on its own power: an intimacy in which Lover lives in the Beloved, and the Beloved in the Lover, in which Persons indwell in one another while remaining distinct in their singular beauty, on the basis of their mutual affirmation and the joy of their shared embrace.

And it is through our relationship with this singular Man, this New Adam, this incomparable Person of the Beloved Son of the Father who became the Son of Mary for our sake—and who lived an unrepeatable life in the fabric of history—that we enter into the heart of this great Mystery. Diverse though we are—indeed, scattered like sheep on the hillsides through sin and division (Is 53:6-7; Jn 11:51-52)—we are drawn together into unity through our union with Jesus Christ. He gathers us together, like a divine Magnet which, reaching out and touching the scattered pieces of metal spread to and fro and lost in the dust, lifts them up into harmony and unity within himself in his utter surrender to the Father. Yes, for he sweeps us up into his own magnetism which polarizes him entirely to his Father, this magnetism who is the very presence and energy of the Holy Spirit, whose very activity is to draw to the Father, and, in drawing to the Father, to draw into unity.