

LOOKING INTO HIS
LOVING GAZE

On the Beauty of Prayer

Joshua Elzner

To learn more about the author, or to access further materials (in text and audio) for prayer and reflection, you may visit his website:

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INTRODUCTION

As far as I can recall, Part I of this book was written in the period shortly before Easter 2018 (with the exception of Meditation 6). Parts II and III were written between October and December of the same year. If you encounter some of the same themes being repeated, this is the reason, since the meditations have been brought together here without any effort to harmonize them. However, I suspect that you will discern an inner harmony throughout, precisely because they spring from a prolonged gaze on a single Mystery, and from the effort to humbly receive and transparently communicate this Mystery in words, though in the awareness that no words can adequately express it.

My hope is, rather, simply to help you, the reader, in some way to enter more deeply into the intimate prayer to which our loving God invites you...to encounter the depth of his gaze, which reveals both who you truly are as his precious and beloved child, and who he, the infinitely beautiful and lovable One, wants to be for you.

PART I

THE CROSS WITHIN THE CIRCLE

MEDITATION I

I am What You See in Me

In our world so many people suffer from a profound crisis of identity. Individually and as a community we no longer know who we are. The symptom of this sense of unknowing is a deep restlessness. Where have I come from? Where am I going? These questions remain ambiguous for so many, and their answers even more so. Indeed, many have given up on ever finding an answer (perhaps without realizing this). Instead, we try to create meaning for ourselves, to fashion our own identity through work, through achievements, through a kind of “mission,” through a reputation in the eyes of others, or through any number of things. Or perhaps we immerse ourselves in an endless pursuit of pleasures, amusements, and sensations in order to dull the abiding sense that something essential is missing, but we don’t know how to find it.

But in the midst of this profound sense of “rootlessness,” of isolation from any greater meaning, there persists in our hearts a thirst for something more. Our restlessness is not only a sign that something is wrong—it is also, and more, a sign that something is right. In other words, however lost we may find ourselves, there is a deeper reality alive in the depths of our hearts that nothing else can efface or destroy. We continue to thirst, to yearn, to aspire to happiness, to love, to joy. We yearn, as self-sufficient as we may try to be, to find ourselves sheltered in the embrace of a love that is constant and enduring. Indeed, each one of us yearns to be seen, loved, cherished, welcomed, and held by another in a love that is absolute and unique.

It is not enough for me to be immersed in a crowd of people moving in the same direction. It is not enough for me to work toward common goals, nor even to give myself, individually, for the common good. There is a flame burning deep in my heart that causes me to step out of the “crowd” and to cry out...to cry out for a love that sees me uniquely and loves me absolutely. And if I do not encounter this love, this love

which is at the very ground of my existence and is the source of my dignity—then I do not know, truly, who I am. And thus I also find myself unable to look upon others and to respect in them their own unique and unrepeatable personal mystery and dignity.

I realize that the crowd is something very different from the family, from the community. In a crowd all are “anonymous.” But in a family each has a name, and it is precisely because we are known as we are that we are united so intimately together. Yes, the name—this is something so important. I know my name in being given it by another, in being loved by another. But how many in our world are “nameless,” despite having a name! This is because they have not known the love that alone gives life, the love that pronounces their name with tenderness, with reverence, with delight. I can only begin to accept the person that I am, to love my own name, my own unique identity, when I realize that it is something beautiful and worthy of being loved. In other words, I can only begin to see beauty in myself whenever I realize that another person sees it in me. I begin to see myself anew within the gaze of love that another person directs toward me.

But even if I am given this gift through another human being—a father or mother, a spouse or friend—is this really enough? This person doesn’t really understand me fully and completely. And they do not give me my existence, my identity, even if they literally chose for me the name by which I am called. They do, however, see in me something true, something beautiful, which awakens in them reverence before the mystery that I am. Mystery...this is something bigger than the human heart. Ah, the human heart is a mystery to itself! This is because it is a gift from Another, from the One who is bigger than the human heart, bigger than the entire created universe.

Here we can trace the lines back to the Origin of our identity, of the unique identity of each one of us, as well as to the only true basis of our community with one another. In the depths of the silence of my heart, I find myself being looked upon with love by a Presence which is both intimately close and infinitely mysterious. Yet this very presence is revealed to me by the One who came among us and took our humanity, the Son of the Father, who reveals to us the face of the God who loves us. Yes, Jesus Christ drew near to us and made visible before our eyes the gaze of

our loving Father. In him there occurs a mutual beholding: my thirst to be loved, cherished, and accepted encounters the thirst of God who yearns for me. My eyes, continually searching restlessly for the absolute love for which I was made, meet the gaze of God seeking me out with ardent longing. In the tender eyes of God-become-man, in the gentle gaze of Jesus, I begin to learn—gradually, gradually—the way in which God looks upon me.

And not only this, but he himself begins to reveal the meaning of this mysterious and loving gaze. All of his actions manifest it; all of his words reveal it. In everything, he draws near to me. He yearns to come close, and he does come close—even to entering into the very burden of my shame, the pain of my loneliness, the anguish of my darkness. And he loves me...he loves me in this place. He stretches wide his arms to embrace me. He opens his Heart to receive me. And he gives himself, gives himself totally to me. *This, this, my beloved, is how much I love you.*

And as he is stretched out here upon the Cross, he unveils before me, in the shame of his nakedness, the vulnerable mystery of my own heart, which I have so often cloaked over in shame. I have sinned. I have done evil. I have done ugly and disgraceful things toward myself, toward my own mind, my own heart, my own body; I have done such things toward others as well; and I have lived, God, as if you did not exist. And ashamed of this, I have hidden myself from your gaze. I feared that you would condemn me, reject me, and lay an unbearable burden on my shoulders. But now, in your nakedness, I see something else. In your wounds, Jesus, I see something mysteriously beautiful... I see that woundedness, a space of deep vulnerability, is a doorway into the inner heart. And these wounds beckon me, they beckon me to the Sacred Heart which is unveiled through them, and draws me to itself. And as I come nearer, hesitant, afraid, unsure of what I will encounter, but drawn nonetheless by a mysterious force...I encounter something amazing.

Jesus, as I stand at the foot of your Cross, I hear those words which you speak: *I thirst.* You thirst, Jesus? You thirst, my God? What do you thirst for? For water? No...I hear something else, something that those loving eyes of yours tell me. Here the wounds, the eyes, and the words work together to tell me a single message. *You thirst for me.* You have descended all this way into my suffering in order to embrace me here.

You have come to such depths in order to open your Heart to me where I need you the most. And now, making yourself utterly vulnerable before me, like a beggar, you ask for the drink of my love. You beg for the gift of my heart. And why?

You, Jesus, behold me...and you behold me not as a burden, not as an anonymous face in a crowd, not as an instrument for achieving your ends. No, you behold me with the absoluteness of Divine Love, a Love that not only welcomes and accepts me in all the reality that I am, but positively desires and wills me to be the unique person that I am. Yes, you have created me to be *this* person; you have given me the gift of myself, of my own life, of every moment of my life, flowing unceasingly from your loving hands and Heart. And what flows from the Heart of God is always beautiful. Beautiful...I am beautiful with a unique and unrepeatable beauty, and your gaze, Jesus, reveals this to me. For not only do you accept me, not only do you will me and create me, but, seeing the beauty that you have created, you *thirst* for me! Yes, Jesus, from all eternity, you and your Father have desired me!

This is what your wounded and vulnerable Heart reveals to me: that you yearn to love me and to be loved by me. You thirst for the love of my heart—for the very gift of my heart which you have first given to me! You thirst in this way because only when you receive the free gift of my heart can you unite me intimately to yourself. Yes, you see that I am beautiful—a beauty that you yourself have given—and this beauty draws your Heart toward me. You have created me for yourself. I am myself a gift that is born from the inmost recesses of your loving Heart. And looking upon my beauty that has come from you, you thirst to unite me to yourself, to hold me close, so that my heart and your Heart, pressed up intimately against one another, may beat together in a harmonious hymn of love and beauty.

MEDITATION 2

Blossoming within Belovedness

In the depths of this encounter with the loving God, with the God who thirsts for me, I discover my authentic identity. Beforehand I looked here and there for meaning, for a sense of security, either giving my heart away only to find myself used, abused, disappointed, or at least dissatisfied...or locking it up tight in a box of isolation and fear. But now, now I know who I am: I am a beloved child of God. Yes, this is the truth: *I am beloved*. I felt deep down that I could not give myself identity, but had to either attain it through achievement, or receive it from another. But achievement falls far short of the depth to which my heart aspires, not only because I find myself faltering and weak, but because whatever I achieve comes from myself and remains my own, marked by my own frailty and limitation. It does not give me myself, but only expresses the particular self that I am. It does not answer the question: who am I? Where do I come from? Why am I here?

Now, through this encounter with the thirst of God in Christ, I see that my identity does indeed come to me as a gift from Another. It comes not as something I have earned or achieved, but as the overflowing of his own loving Heart. I am a gift, a gift flowing unceasingly from the loving Heart of God, from the intimate embrace of the Father and the Son in their one Spirit. This embrace of the Trinity is so rich, so full, so abundant that it overflows in the creation of the world, and, yes, in the creation of the unique reflection of divine beauty that I am. And now the amazing thing is that the Divine Furnace thirsts to reunite itself to the tiny spark of eternal fire that I am. Further, I myself thirst to return to this Furnace, to immerse myself into the flames of Divine Love which consume without destroying and burn without pain—but rather consummate the union in the joy of intimacy.

Looking beyond the surface of my life, I find the burning flames of Love present there in the depths, the presence of the God who loves me and sustains me unceasingly. In the depths of my heart, where I am

alone and defenseless, where no one else can penetrate but me alone... God is present, unceasingly looking upon me, unceasingly loving me, unceasingly holding me in his mysterious embrace. But as I make contact with this loving presence, I realize that it is not so much he who dwells in me as I who dwell in him. I find myself enfolded in his encircling embrace, sheltered within his protective presence.

Yes, it is something like the fish of the sea living in the water. It is their habitat, the whole context of their life, without which they cannot live. The water enfolds them on every side; it shelters and protects and nourishes them, adjusting itself gently to their every movement, molding itself around their unique contours. So my life is enveloped in the ever-present love of God, enfolded in his tender presence.

Ah, yes! It is like a little child in the womb of its mother! This place in the body of each woman, God, you have fashioned to be a sign of your love and your care for each one of us. Throughout my life I am carried in the womb of your love, just as an infant is carried in the womb of its mother. But your Love is even more...for nothing, nothing can separate me from your love—even when the image of motherhood does not live up to its calling! Even should a mother forget her child, you, my God, will not forget me. I am wrapped tightly, without ceasing, within your Love. And it is in this Love, in this Love alone, that I know the truth of who I am.

I am who I am, not according to my narrow and fear-filled perspective, nor according to the external ideas and prejudices of others, but only in the truth of what you, loving God, see in me. If I yearn to come to peace with myself, then I hear you inviting me to courageously enter into the depths of my heart, to draw near to you in prayer and vulnerability, and to open myself to be gazed upon by you.

How difficult it is to let oneself be looked upon by another! So often my reaction is to turn away, to cover myself over. But this is because I have so often been looked upon by eyes that do not truly understand, or even seek to use, to abuse, to possess, and then to discard. But your gaze, my God, your gaze begins to teach me that I am safe, utterly safe to be naked and defenseless before you. Indeed, this nakedness is safer than anything else, for I find myself clothed and sheltered in the garment of your Love.

As I enter into this inner place of vulnerability, where I lay open before you those places in myself of which I am ashamed, of which I am afraid, of which I am unsure and confused, I experience you pouring forth your Love into them. And this is a Love that gently touches, that consoles, that heals, that transforms, that liberates. Indeed, I realize that in the depth of all the woundedness that I lay open before you, you are loving something deeper than all wounds. My wounds only become places of access for you, places of encounter with my inmost heart, with the truth of who I am deeper than all of these things. You draw near to me in this place, your vulnerability encountering and awakening my own. Your sheltering Love gives me courage to open myself, to share myself, and to welcome you into those places in me that before have been locked up in fear and isolation...those places of shame, but also perhaps those deep desires of my heart which I have been afraid to truly accept and make my own.

There is a beautiful image which can illustrate the truth of what occurs in this place. We see it again and again when we look upon the Eucharistic Host. This is the means, dear Jesus, by which you chose to give yourself to us again and again each day...intimately, physically, your vulnerability touching us in our vulnerability. And what is the shape of the Host, that bread which, through the words of consecration, becomes your very Body? *It is a Circle that enfolds in itself a Cross. It is a Cross cradled within an all-enveloping Circle.* This is an image of our life, my God. This is an image of the all-encircling Love that alone gives meaning to all things, and outside of which nothing occurs. Yes, I am contained right here in the center of this Circle, cradled at every moment in the embrace of your Tenderness and Love.

But am I closed in upon myself, unable to recognize this Love that enfolds me? Or do I allow myself to be opened in the form of a cross, in the openness of acceptance and mutual surrender, and in this way to commune with the Circle of your Love and your tender presence that envelops me on every side?

Before encountering you, my God, I was closed in upon myself, trapped in the narrow circle of my own sin and fear. I yearned to break out, to establish contact with something greater than I am, with another whom I could trust and love. But I found obstacles to this, not only externally, but from within the depths of my own being—for in me I bear

marks of possessiveness, of pride, of pleasure-seeking, and wounds of fear, shame, and insecurity, all of which hinder me from turning out in true vulnerability and love, from opening myself to accept love and to give it.

Nonetheless, Christ has made known to me that this narrow circle of my fallen self is enveloped by another Circle, intimately close and yet infinite in its expanse. This is the Circle of your Love, my God, and your abiding presence. It is the Circle of your ever-present gift—the gift of yourself, the gift of my own being and my life, the gift of every moment and every thing flowing from your loving Heart. Yes, now I find myself at the very center of this great Circle of Love, and realize that my narrow circle is but a point...a point intersected by Love's perfect gift.

And now, in this encounter between myself and you, between my narrowness and your expansiveness, dear God, I feel a profound invitation...and not only an invitation, but a blossoming desire and ability to love, to surrender. Beforehand, I feared to open myself, to share, because I could not trust that my openness would be reciprocated, that my vulnerability would be cherished, that my gift would be received. Yet now, as I am enshrouded wholly in your Love, I find myself beginning to let go of myself, to let down my offenses, and to welcome the gift that unceasingly comes to me. Yes, in opening myself to welcome this pure and gratuitous gift, my heart also spontaneously blossoms in reciprocal love and trusting surrender.

Through this encounter, the narrow circle of my isolation is burst open, and I find myself in communion with the enveloping Circle of the Trinity, resting in the peace and joy of your abiding embrace, dear God. I begin to glimpse, to glimpse anew that my life is a pure gift, a gift that lives at every moment on the law of *gratuity*...that is, on the law of the free and uncalculating gift that bestows upon me all things, bursting forth from the floodgates of the divine generosity. Yes, and in response... in response what is awakened? A sense of obligation? Of inferiority? Of burdensome debt? No, that is not it. It rather awakens in me what I have so long forgotten: *the relaxation and playfulness of a child*. For a child can play, can receive each moment in its unique meaning and beauty, enjoying it, because the child knows that he or she is completely and unreservedly loved.

The child feels sheltered, sheltered by the Love that has given her life, that has accompanied her from the earliest days. This is true from the time she was nestled in the womb of her mother, from the time she nursed at her breast, from the time she gazed into those loving eyes, and experienced: *You are beautiful, my child, and I love you.* Yes, this is the wisdom of the child: that she knows herself to be enveloped in the all-embracing Circle of Love. And in this Love her whole life unfolds, her whole life finds meaning, her whole life blossoms in the joy of playfulness and in the repose of intimacy and trust. And how blessed it is whenever her parents teach this child to give a name to this sheltering and all-enveloping Love: the name of God.

However, whenever abuse, or trauma, or fear enters in, the child begins to doubt the security that this Love gives to her. In the face of the failure or infidelity of her parents, in the face of the tragedies of life, this sense of security, of being sheltered in her vulnerability, begins to give way to fear and the need to protect, to control, to hide. But, in addition, the child's wisdom comes into conflict with another reality that is not merely external, but which she bears in her own nature, the result of original sin: she finds in herself the tendency, not to receive the gift, but to possess it wrongly; not to freely receive things in the freedom of playfulness, but to grasp them for the pleasure they afford; not to open herself to others in trust and in generous response to their value, but to use them, to manipulate them.

At this point the wisdom and grace of childhood stands before the invitation to authentic maturity. Here the genius of childhood is called to blossom into the genius of maturity, losing nothing of its pristine freshness, but expanding more and more into the openness of authentic and trusting love, into the fullness of acceptance of others and the gift of oneself. But what gives the strength, the guidance, and the security for such a movement? As she grows older, the young woman's parents no longer represent absolute love for her, and she must look deeper, further, to discover this absolute Love for which she still thirsts...which she still needs. Ah, heavenly Father, but your face is so fractured in this world—not because you are not present, but because we have forgotten how to see you! Who can help us to pass from the image of enveloping love to its Reality, to pass from the fear that would isolate us into the expansiveness of trusting surrender? Who can reconnect us with the Circle

of Love that we felt so keenly at the beginning of life?

Here is where Jesus comes to us, the Son from the Father, and draws near to us in our loneliness, our fear, and our innate longing for love and the security it affords. He comes as a little child, vulnerable and dependent, who himself grows in the womb of his mother, who nurses at her breast, who gazes into her eyes. He plays as a little one, rejoicing in the beauty of life; he grows and matures, and this awareness of the enveloping gift of existence does not give way. Rather, it only blossoms as his mind and heart develop into manhood. Jesus becomes a man without ever ceasing to be a child. And the love he sees reflected in the face of Mary immediately reveals to him the Love of his heavenly Father. Yes, the circle of Mary's love immediately draws the Heart of Jesus to the Circle of the Trinity from which he has come, and which, indeed, he has never left.

Now he dwells, as a man, in the heart of our own existence, yet remaining within the encircling mystery of the Trinity's life of love, in unceasing intimacy with the Father in the Spirit who binds them together. Yes, he receives each moment from the hands of his Father, in the gratitude and playfulness of a little child. Even all of his mature responsibility, even the whole of his mission, unfolds only within this all-encompassing playfulness of love, within this repose of intimate embrace.

And within this Circle of Love—and on its strength—Jesus descends even further. He pursues us into the depths of our isolation and fear, into the loneliness and suffering that our sins and the sins of others cause. He becomes present in the anguished heart of the young woman who is abused by her father; he becomes present in the heart of the man who sits alone in the darkness, his heart aching with emptiness after another sexual escapade; he becomes present in the heart of the man who sits in prison awaiting execution; he becomes present in the heart of the poor woman who is forgotten by her family and her society, and finds her life draining away through hunger and illness; he becomes present in the heart of each one of us, in the unique story of every life. Yes, in the depths of his Passion and Death, he descends into the place of darkness that each of us bears within us. He comes close, lovingly close, and gently touches our anguished and fear-filled hearts. *I am here, and I love you. I feel what you feel. I cry out with your own pain, which I have tak-*

en into myself. But I want to hold you, now, beloved, and to take you to myself. I understand your wounds, and I am present in them; but I want to take you, to hide you in my own wounds.

Here, in the most mysterious way, the Circle of Love has hidden itself within the narrow circle of sin and fear! But in doing so it has burst it open from the inside! It has re-opened it to the expansiveness of Love, to the enveloping embrace of God. And it has done so through the Cross, which intersects at a point—in the depths of my own unique heart!—and, penetrating the core of my being, opens me to reach out lovingly and trustingly to God. And in reaching out I make contact with the Circle of God’s Embrace, receiving anew the gift of his tenderness and surrendering to him in return.

All of my efforts, all of my struggles, were not enough to liberate me. But now God, who has always been present, has made himself even more present to me...in order to re-open me anew to receive the gift of his Love. He has revealed to me again the strength of his love, his abiding presence from which nothing can separate me. Jesus shows me this, for he has joined me in the darkest place. He has cried out in my name: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Mt 27:46; Ps 22:1), and yet, in the midst of this, he has shown me the Light that is undimmed by any darkness, shining brightly in its midst. He has shown me the intimate bond of love uniting the Father and the Son, a bond that even this anguish cannot weaken or tear asunder. “I am not alone, for the Father is with me” (Jn 16:32), Jesus says, as he enters into the darkness to be with us there. And what this means is that the Father is with *me* too. Yes, for he also says: “as the Father has loved me, so have I loved you” (Jn 15:9). Indeed, “the Father himself loves you” (Jn 16:27). Therefore, even when I feel isolated and alone, I am not alone, but enveloped in the embrace of God, in the loving presence of the Father and the Son.

I need only throw open the doors of my heart again to welcome Love that comes to me anew. I am immersed in this Love like a fish in the water, like a child in the womb, and I need not fear opening my darkness to this Light, opening my heart to the One who loves me beyond my wildest imaginings. He comes to me in the tenderness of his Heart, which has become vulnerable, naked, and needy for my sake—to the point of thirsting for me, to the point of being wounded in order to welcome me in the heart of my own woundedness.

But, ah...your wounds now shine with a radiant and glorious light. And as I open myself to touch these wounds, and to let you touch me in mine, I find myself reborn at every moment in the truth of your Love, in the identity which has always been mine, even when covered over by darkness and fear: *You are my beloved, and I hold you unceasingly within my embrace.*

MEDITATION 3

To be a Child, a Spouse, and a Parent

The gift that flows to me from the Heart of Jesus is the gift of adoption, the gift of being taken up into his own childlike relationship with the Father. I was created for this from the very beginning, created with an openness to communion with God, and, in God, with every other human person. But because of sin I have become closed in upon myself. And, indeed, this communion is not something that I myself can establish, however much I try. This is why you came among us, Jesus, and became a man who lived in our midst. In doing this you espoused our humanity to the divinity of God, and took to yourself the fractured image of God that we are. Thus you restored us to the openness of love that we have lost, and you have drawn us into the Circle of the Trinity's own divine life in an even deeper way than our first parents had experienced in the beginning, in the Garden of Eden.

Yes, this enveloping Circle of Love is the joy of childhood, the restfulness of being held unceasingly within your loving embrace. When I reflect deeply, entering in silence into the depths of my heart where I am alone before you, Jesus, I discover that I am sharing in the very silent dialogue of love that is ever occurring between you and your eternal Father. Indeed, I hear those beautiful words that he silently speaks to you and within you, in the bosom of the Trinity's life, in the ineffable breath of the Spirit: *You are my beloved Son, in whom I delight*. But not only this, Jesus...no, not only this! I hear these words—unexpected wonder—I hear these words being spoken to me! *I have created you, dearly beloved, to be my child too. In my Son I have created you, and in my Son I have taken you back to myself*.

This is the whole purpose of my existence, is it not, dear God? To rest without ceasing in the joy of your divine embrace, in the security of your paternal arms? Yes, it is... Here all of my restless searching finds its fulfillment. Here all of my insecurities are cared for perfectly. Here my

thirst for intimacy blossoms in the joy of communion with you.

And indeed, when my heart is held by you, when I experience such a love and such a gift, I find that I can open myself, confidently and lovingly, to my brothers and sisters within this world. I realize that you love them as you love me—and yet each of them, each person, uniquely and unrepeatably. As you have gazed upon me with love, and through this gaze have brought me back to life, so too I begin to gaze upon others. I begin to love them as you have loved me, to accept them, to welcome them in your name. Indeed, through the encounter of my thirst with your divine thirst, a fire is kindled deep within me. This is the fire of your own thirst alive in my heart, awakening me to thirst for my brothers and sisters, to thirst for them in the beauty that is uniquely their own, to thirst that each of them will experience the joy of your love, the enveloping repose of your embrace, the happiness of the intimacy that you so ardently desire.

Yes, within this all-enveloping circle of childhood, I find thirst blossoming into ever-deepening intimacy. This occurs because the truth of childhood within me grows stronger and stronger. It blossoms from within and gradually overcomes the other forces within me that have kept it trapped inside—my fear, my possessiveness, my shame, my flight from your love. I gradually come to live more habitually within the truth of my authentic identity as your beloved child.

And within this identity, within this repose, a profound thirst is awakened anew. This is the thirst of longing for ever-deeper union, the thirst for a full-fledged *spousal embrace*. Thus I discover that spoushood is enfolded within the reality of childhood, and is a reality that blossoms within it. Did not Jesus, the beloved Son of the Father, come into the world to espouse us to himself, to effect a marriage with every human heart? Yes, and by doing so, by making each of us his precious bride, he has drawn us to share with him in the joy of his own Family Life—in the intimacy of the Trinity's embrace, where he rejoices to be the Son of such a Father, to be united to him in the kiss of that blessed Spirit!

As I allow myself to be taken up in your arms, my Jesus, I find you pressing me gently to your breast, communicating to me your love—this love that you receive from the Father. And, uniting me intimately to

yourself, you carry me with you into the place where you eternally dwell: in the bosom of the heavenly Father. Thus my spousal union with you only deepens my experience of childhood, just as this union itself blossoms within the context of childhood, yours and mine. Two children of the heavenly Father—you, the Son eternally begotten before the creation of the world, and me, a creature who has been created from the mystery of this eternal Love—and yet we are siblings, sharing a common human nature, and now, yes, a common divine life. And in this sharing of all things, we become spouses in the unique ardor of mutual self-giving, in the interpenetration of persons that such a love seeks...you abiding in me, and I in you.

Finally, this spousal union itself blossoms in another mystery: that of parenthood, of fatherhood or motherhood. For the heart that is united to you, Jesus, becomes filled with your divine presence and life, and brings forth this life more deeply into the world, communicating it to others. We see this so beautifully in Mary. Is she not above all a daughter of the Father? Yes, she has been known, willed, and loved from all eternity. And she has been created, not merely to be a mother, but to be above all a child, loved for her own sake. And as a daughter she opens herself to the Love that descends upon her and seeks to wed itself to her in her uniqueness. She becomes thus a spouse, a spouse of God. And in this nuptial union between Creator and creature, she is impregnated with the divine life and becomes mother, a mother of the Father's eternal Son. And not only this, but the mother again becomes a spouse in a different way, as she stands beneath the Cross. For here the Cross effects another, deeper union, as the Man and the Woman, the New Adam and the New Eve, experience the perfect mutual surrender that binds them together in a Love that is stronger than death. And this new union is again a new maternity, a new parenthood, as such a union brings forth—from the Heart of Christ and from the faith of Mary—the whole of the Church, and each one of us, beloved children of God, reborn to divine life.

In the existence of each one of us, dear Jesus, the same mystery is played out—and yet each time special and unique. I am a beloved child of the Father; I am a spouse wed to you, Jesus, through the Cross and Resurrection; and through this union I bear in myself the divine life as it

seeks to bring forth its beauty in this world. Indeed, I learn to love others as I have been loved, turning out with paternal or maternal tenderness, and with a nuptial generosity and ardor, and with the humility of a child who is infinitely loved. This Love that becomes present in and through me—conceived in the “womb” of my life, pouring forth in and through me in the pouring out of my life for others—this indeed has one goal: to spread out to touch, heal, and tenderly embrace others too, and to draw us all back to the very Source of this Love, into the inmost heart of your own intimate embrace, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

MEDITATION 4

A Heart Opened by Love

I have seen three beautiful mysteries, the latter of which are contained totally within the former: childhood, spousehood, and parenthood. *Childhood* is the outer, all-enveloping circle. *Spousehood* is the union that flowers within childhood as a plant from rich soil. *Parent-hood* is the fruitfulness that blossoms from this intimacy, from the transparency of a heart united to your own.

This flowering of love allows your divine light to break forth more deeply, through me, into the lives of others, revealing to them the beauty of your Love, the shelter of your all-enfolding embrace. This movement, indeed, seeks to sweep us all up together into the spirals of eternal Love, drawing us into the ceaseless dance of the Trinity's life, where we shall all be one with you, dear God, and with one another, for all eternity.

I have seen that the all-enfolding circle of childhood, giving an enduring peace and joy in the certainty of being loved and cradled always in this Love, also awakens in the heart the experience of longing, of thirst for nuptial intimacy with you, my God. The childlike relationship with you that is the very ground of my being—this filial dependence in which you hold and sustain me in my inmost heart and in every fiber of my being—this also seeks to blossom in an unspeakably intimate spousal embrace. It seeks to mature into a conscious, full, and free personal communion of mutual acceptance and surrender, of shared knowledge and love. The words “abide in me, and I in you” (Jn 15:4) which are already true, not only through your substantial indwelling in me as a creature, and my abiding in you for my very existence, but also through the gift of personhood (and even more of adoption through grace), seek a still greater unfolding: in the grace of spousehood, of nuptial intimacy with you.

But what prevents this spousal union from maturing is the narrowness of the sinful, fear-filled, and possessive heart—for such union only

occurs when Lover and beloved are utterly surrendered to one another and open to receive one another utterly. Yes, only when I open myself vulnerably to you and allow you to look on me in my nakedness can you give yourself to me as you desire. Only when I experience your loving gaze and your tender embrace can I totally surrender myself into your welcoming Heart.

Indeed, as your beloved, I am made in your image from the beginning, and already bear in myself a certain openness to infinity, to the expansiveness of your Love and your divine Being. This openness exists in the form of dependency, of continuous and vulnerable receptivity to your Mystery, of the humble entrustment of myself to you. But in sin I am tempted instead to grasp for “autonomy,” for a kind of simulated “divinity” through possessiveness, pride, and disordered pleasure—and, at root, through a deep fear which springs from a lack of trust in your goodness and generosity as my eternal Father and my divine Spouse.

The “image of God” which I am therefore becomes narrowed and closed in upon itself—even though I never cease to cry out (now with a confused and muffled cry) for the relationship from which I have fallen. I bear in myself, even if marred, the original experiences of childhood, of the yearning for nuptial embrace, and, indeed, of openness to the creative fruitfulness and tender love of parenthood. The human heart was created in a state of perfect openness to the all-enfolding Circle of the Trinity’s love and embrace—in a state of joyful relationship with the intimate yet transcendent presence of God, and in radical receptivity to the gift of himself and, in him, of all things in each moment. But after sinning, our original parents (and all of us since) bear a fractured and fallen nature which is now “curved in upon itself,” as Saint Augustine says: *curvatus in se*.

In the beginning, before sin, there was a primal kind of “cruciformity” (openness in the form of a cross) within the human heart, which reflected the radical openness of the Divine Persons in the Trinity. For cruciformity ultimately means that the arrows of love go in and out to and from the self toward the other, in a ceaseless interchange of acceptance and reciprocal self-surrender. This is both to receive love and to give it, to welcome and to surrender, to abide in loving and trust-filled relationship—in the spiritual nakedness, born of trust and confidence, which was first lost in the Garden of Eden. In this way the human heart

remains in unceasing relationship with the enveloping Circle of the Trinity's embrace, because its being—a "point" at the center of this Circle—remains connected to the Circle through the "Cross" of openness and trusting vulnerability. The heart's receptivity and reciprocal surrender allow it to be in constant contact with such a Gift. Yet indeed even in sin the heart does not leave the circumference of the Circle, but remains precisely in the center...for we can never leave the all-enfolding and all-pervading Being and Love of God! However, it exists collapsed in upon itself and its own "narrow and isolated circle" of self.

In order to enter back into relationship with the Circle of God, the narrow circle of self is therefore invited to be re-opened, opened up into dialogue with what is outside, with the other: with the One who is perfect Love and in whom alone the restless heart can find rest. But not only is the "turning in upon self" re-opened to God, to the divine Lover, but the heart's relationship with external, created things is also healed and transfigured. For since sin has this twofold effect—not only a turning in upon self away from God, but also a turning of external things in upon the self for its own disordered purposes—so the healing of the heart allows a joyful rediscovery of both God and all that he has made, and indeed the experience of the true self as it flows from God's loving hands.

In the beginning the innocent heart received all freely in a state of gratitude and detachment—as a pure gift within the gift of God himself. It received all things in purity of love, in reverence, in an authentic response to the true and unique value of each thing. And it received them, dealt with them, and related to them in accordance with their true interior meaning, the primal "law of gift" that God inscribed into each created reality. In other words, *the heart lived in a primal state of poverty, chastity, and obedience*. This threefold state is the state of openness in love, openness to receive and to give within the realm of the Father's all-enfolding Gift, within the Circle of his Love. This is also, therefore, the state of interior and exterior cruciformity—and yet a cruciformity without pain, without sacrifice, but rather full of abundance, of intimacy, of freedom...full of the joy of blossoming love.

Now, in order that I may be re-opened to this openness, may enter again into unceasing contact with the primal Gift that still lies at the very

ground of my being and my existence, the lines of the Cross impress themselves again upon my life. This is the meaning of the redemptive Passion and Resurrection of Jesus, is it not? He enters into the narrowness of our circle of sin and re-opens it—he bursts it open!—through the expansiveness of his own loving Heart. Now, in letting ourselves be irradiated by his presence and conformed to him in his own love, our hearts too become “cruciform” and in this way rediscover the path to fullness of love once again. This insight reveals that the true meaning of the Cross is not suffering but healing, not merely sacrifice but the liberating power of love...the reopening of the closed heart to the vulnerability of loving and trust-filled encounter.

Indeed, we discover Love already coming to us first, before we have even ourselves learned to love. We discover Love utterly enveloping us, pressing gently and intimately upon us, and penetrating our whole being. And all we need to do is to open ourselves to this ever-present Gift, and to allow it to work in us. It awakens in us not only receptivity, but also a response of mutual surrender. The touch of this Love rekindles in us our thirst, our yearning for the fullness of love and intimacy, of filial and spousal intimacy with God.

This thirst is an essential part of being human, for God implanted it in us from the beginning, in creating us for himself. It has become dulled through sin and fear and distraction by so many other things; but in encountering the love and the passionate thirst of God drawing near to us, our own thirst is reawakened again and set to flame. And such a thirst, born from gratitude for the Gift already given, from being desired by the One who is the desire of every heart—this thirst is the driving force to walk the path of the Cross, the path of vulnerable openness and loving surrender, toward the full blossoming of this union.

This thirst for intimacy, born from God’s own thirst for intimacy with us, is the strength that allows us to walk the “exodus” out of our narrowness into the expansiveness of love once again (which is also the true “homecoming” into our authentic truth in intimacy with God). This is the journey of opening our wounds to the healing touch of the Wounded Healer, whose vulnerability meets our vulnerability, whose tenderness meets our longing, whose loving gift enfolds, awakens, and sustains our own. It is true that this path of the Cross now involves suffering, since it occurs in conflict with the broken and isolating tenden-

cies within our own heart, in the world around us, and in conflict with the spirits of evil. But as we fix our sights anew on the Circle of God's cradling Love and presence that enfolds us—enfolds us at every single moment!—we find courage, strength, and abiding peace of *already* being held...to progress each moment into an ever deeper and more complete intimacy. Indeed, we recognize that there is something beautiful at work in the midst of the pain, and unspeakably deeper than the pain: the joy of love, and the blessedness of loving encounter.

Thus the gratuitous gift of existence that we receive from God—and the equally gratuitous gift of redemption—blossoms in us in the fullness of childhood and spousehood, which is the restoration (and indeed surpassing) of the intimacy that we were created for in the beginning. This union is a breathtaking bond of love, a sharing of life, between the human person and God, between God the Lover and his dearly beloved, between God the Father and Christ the Bridegroom and the heart who is his child and spouse, within the bond of the Spirit. Further, from this interior relationship between the human heart with the divine Beloved—in its innate and unrepeatable solitude, in its own unique personal mystery—the heart also opens out to other human persons, and indeed to the whole creation.

The heart's relationships with all creation are renewed, because they are again irradiated with the light of the divine Gift—in a spirit of poverty, chastity, and obedience—in a spirit of radical openness in trust and childlike confidence, in pure and ardent love. The expansiveness of love that occurs in the heart's relationship with the Circle of God's enfolding presence allows it to open out in love to all other persons who are also enveloped in this Circle. Yes, the whole of the created universe, all that exists, is contained within the circumference of this Circle of Love. And the more the heart enters into union with God, the more it can be—and is!—in union with all that exists. For all is enveloped in God, and, indeed, God is present intimately in each and every thing, such that only in him can it be received and loved in truth.

As the human heart is gradually opened and healed, it begins to rediscover the beautiful marks of divine gift in every aspect of creation, in every person, in every event and circumstance. It is restored to the joy of childhood, the signature of which is the *care-free playfulness of being sheltered in the arms of Love*, and playfully and joyfully receiving each

thing as a free and undeserved gift. The heart is also restored to the passionate ardor of spousal love, to that profound experience of being intensely awake and alive that blossoms when love is enkindled by the beauty of another. For now the heart begins to see hidden countenance of the Beloved in every thing, and thus to yearn for him, to yearn for him deeply and ardently, seeking his face everywhere. And indeed it finds him present in everything, and is thus united to him, united to him through what can be called the “sacrament of the present moment,” the sacrament of each thing in which God is present and through which he draws near to us.

Finally, the heart finds itself blossoming in a mysterious transparency to the divine gift, in a fruitfulness born of this filial and spousal union: “He who abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit” (Jn 15:5). Seeing and relating to all things within the truth of God’s gift, the heart can cooperate with God in ordering them to their proper ends, within their place in the intimacy that God desires to establish with his children and with the whole of creation. And even deeper than this stewardship or external cooperation, the human heart itself both conceives and gives birth from the divine gift, as the very presence of God and his redemptive love is poured forth through the open heart into the hearts of others.

It is thus that Divine Love can touch more and more persons and gradually re-open them to the same reality of gratuitous gift, to the same openness of love, to the same thirst, and thus to the same joy of intimacy and communion with God and with one another. It is in this way that the “paradise lost” of the beginning of creation, of the Garden of Eden—through the Garden of the Paschal Mystery of Cross and Resurrection—begins to blossom again in a foretaste of the Garden of the New Creation, which will find its fulfillment when Christ comes again. Then, every person will be totally open to the enveloping Circle of the Trinity’s Love, as we find ourselves sheltered in the eternal embrace of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and are united intimately to him and to one another in complete loving acceptance and mutual surrender.

MEDITATION 5

Joy Becomes Compassion and Mercy

Through all of the previous meditations, it has become clear that at the heart of the mystery of the Cross lies the encounter between divine thirst and human thirst—between God’s thirst for us and our thirst for God. Indeed, God thirsts for me first, in order, through his thirst, to awaken my own. I find myself, like the Samaritan woman at the well, going to draw water in the heat of the day—indeed, perhaps seeking satisfaction for my thirst in so many things which are not God, in so many “husbands” which are not my one and only true Spouse. Yet he comes, the divine Bridegroom, and encounters me in the depths of my restless searching, and he asks me for a drink. Yet in his asking is concealed his desire to give me to drink of the living water of his own Love. He thirsts that I may thirst for him. “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him and he would have given you living water” (Jn 4:10).

He speaks a word of gentle power into my searching, into my thirsting, and thus enkindles and directs my thirst anew—back to himself. And not only this, but he immediately begins to satisfy this thirst. For what do I thirst for most, except to be thirsted for by another? To be desired, wanted, seen, embraced, held? Yes, in thirsting for me, God already begins to satiate my own thirst. And, indeed, in thirsting for God in turn, I begin to satiate his own thirst. For what our loving God desires is that we thirst for him, yearn for him, love him, and through this thirst allow him to unite us intimately to himself.

Thus, in the heart of this encounter of thirsts, in the spiral movement of ever-deeper thirsting, there is already *a profound and mysterious repose*. This is a repose in the joy of encounter, in the mystery of being united which already occurs in our mutual thirst for one another. Indeed, all of our thirsting, from now on, occurs enveloped within the primacy of this *already granted repose*, within the mystery of already being embraced and held by God.

It is precisely through this abiding presence of the One who loves me and holds me mysteriously in his embrace—it is precisely through this that my longing is awakened and sustained, and through this that I find courage to open myself vulnerably before him. Within the Circle of his embrace, I find myself being opened up unceasingly in the form of the Cross, in the openness and vulnerability of love and desire, of confidence and trust. To thirst is to be willing to be cruciform, to open up the naked and vulnerable places within me to the gaze of God. He desires to love me in these places, and thus to heal me there, but in order to do so fully, I must bring them before him and open them to his grace. Thus, he says to me, “Go, call your husband” (Jn 4:16), that is, the disorder desire which holds you back from receiving my love to the full. But indeed we have had many husbands, and the one we have now is not our true husband, that is, the authentic Spouse of our soul.

Awareness of the *gift of God*, of his ever-present Love, is precisely what awakens thirst, what begins to unlock the enclosed heart into the vulnerability of encounter and love. And this thirst occurs entirely within the realm of this already-present gift. Further, such openness to gift, such thirst to receive it and encounter it anew in each succeeding moment, is what allows me to enter into contact with the enveloping Circle of Divine Gift again and again. Indeed, a beautiful quality of this thirst is that, since it is already enfolded in a prior and enduring presence, it truly encounters God in each moment. He is here, present, in this instant, communicating himself to me and holding me in his embrace. I may not feel him or see him palpably, but his grace is ever at work touching, opening, healing, and sustaining my heart; his love is ever holding, cherishing, and reverencing me. As this awareness of God’s constant, loving presence, even in the pain and restlessness of my thirst, grows, I come to live a life ever more restful, ever more filled with the peace of total surrender. Thirst, which was awakened through the encounter with God’s thirst for me, now begins to give way to restfulness within the peace of the Trinity’s unchanging mystery...the perfect rest of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the heart of eternity.

My thirst is henceforth irradiated with the peace of abandonment, with the repose of knowing myself to be unceasingly loved and held, already in this life. I thirst, from now on, within the peace of repose, and I

repose within my very thirsting. And indeed the more I grow into this repose, the more I thirst—the more I thirst to be immersed totally in the divine Beloved...and also, yes, the more my heart burns with desire that this same love may pour forth into the hearts of those who have not yet experienced it.

Thus, from within the profound gift that I receive from God, from the heart of my own encounter and union with him, the Cross of sacrificial love for others bursts forth. Is this not the way it was for Jesus, the Son of God? From the bosom of the Father's eternal embrace, from the very mystery of their eternal repose and the joy of their intimacy, the *flame of divine compassion flashes forth*. Jesus comes into this world burning with tenderness and compassion—a compassion which draws its strength precisely from the well of his divine Joy. This Joy, when it encounters human misery and suffering, when it encounters darkness, becomes Compassion and Mercy. Thus Joy, without ceasing to be Joy, plunges into the darkness with the suffering beloved, in order to be with them in their loneliness. And thus it is no longer loneliness, for now there is another presence within it, illumining it from the inside with the inextinguishable light of Love. Present in this place as divine Compassion, as divine Joy cloaked in mercy and tenderly holding us, Jesus re-opens us gradually to the fullness of the divine Joy.

This Joy becomes a flame constantly burning in the heart of my life. And the more purely it burns, the more it begins to flash forth in the desire to enter, with Christ, into the darkness and suffering of my brothers and sisters—not to be extinguished by the darkness, but to light the lamp of love in their hearts as well. Thus the encounter with God's thirst awakens my own thirst, and through this draws me to experience in this life already the mystery of the divine repose. And from the mystery of this repose it awakens thirst anew—now a burning thirst for others, who bear in themselves the marks of God's beauty, and whom God thirsts to unite intimately to himself.

MEDITATION 6

Transformed in the Light of His Gaze

The immense love of God, touching the heart, draws it, throughout the succeeding days and years, in an ever deepening pursuit of the Divine Beauty. The Bridegroom's touch pierces the depths of the soul, and in piercing, it both wounds and heals: *heals* by enveloping in the security and shelter of Eternal Love, and *wounds* by awakening a thirst for another encounter, for a deeper intimacy, for a more total belonging (and this "wound" indeed is simply a yet deeper form of healing). The human heart is awakened by the vivifying touch of the God of Love, and through this touch is ravished—forever changed by this awesome and loving encounter.

The heart is restless for the Love that it has glimpsed, and feels that the whole of creation is like a veil shrouding the Face that it seeks, hiding the Beauty that alone can give rest. This makes the creation not less beautiful, but more...for now it is beautiful, not in itself alone, but because it allows something of the Beloved's light to filter through, something of the living water of his love to trickle in to the reach of the thirsty heart. But these glimpses, these sips, are not enough to satisfy. The mystery of union with God consists, mysteriously, in a constant pursuit of his face, a continuous movement toward him who is both within and beyond.

But over time the restless heart begins to experience something new, something yet deeper than this restless thirst. It continues to thirst, to yearn, to seek—but what before was restless, anguished, and perhaps confused, comes to be irradiated with a gentle light and enveloped in an all-encompassing peace. This is the peace of Presence...the Presence of the One who is near (intimately near!) even in the sense of his absence, and who shows himself even as he remains hidden. The heart which was seeking so much to transcend itself, to go out of itself into him, now re-

laxes into his embrace which already cradles it, and always has.

Yes, and this, mysteriously, is what allows true self-forgetfulness, the complete abandonment of oneself into his arms: *the simple openness to the gift of his love ever given*. The thirsting heart comes to know that, in all of its thirsting, he has been thirsting more...in all of its seeking, he has been seeking first...in all of its desire, it has already been contained in his ever present Love sustaining it. It relaxes, therefore, its feverish desire; it learns, little by little, to let go of self, saying simply:

Take me, my Love, I am all yours. I give myself to you—yes, I let myself be given, given by the very gift that I first receive. At every moment, this Love comes to me; at every moment this Love cradles me in itself. Ah, yes, my God, my Life, my Joy, my All... I belong to you. I belong to you, and only because I am yours am I also mine. And I do not cling to myself, as if clinging would protect or shelter me. My only shelter, God, is you and your Love, received in utter poverty of heart and life, with open and empty hands and heart. I need not grasp or possess...for in the matter of love, to possess is, rather, to be possessed. And this is my only desire, my only wish: to be possessed by you, eternal Love.

From this profound openness, this childlike and spousal abandonment of self into God's loving arms, a union is effected between the Trinity and the human heart. This union, however, occurs in a place so deep, so pure, that it is invisible to human eyes and transparent for human thought and feeling. It is like the *light*, radiant and true, in which all things are seen, but which itself cannot be grasped or possessed. Its radiance is so pure that it is felt and seen in everything, and yet slips through one's fingers if one wishes to take it as one's own. It belongs, already, entirely, to the human heart, to the heart that lets itself be irradiated by this gift. All that is necessary is to be present, to not flee, and to let oneself be looked upon by those piercing Eyes of Love.

This is the presence of God that enfolds the beloved heart, already in this life, and cradles it unceasingly. It is the truth of God's loving, enduring gaze, which nothing—no darkness, no pain, no suffering, nor even any failure or sin—can take away. For he looks, he looks, unceasingly... and his gaze pierces every darkness, scattering the mists more surely than the rising sun does the lingering moisture of the night.

To rest within his gaze, his knowledge, his love...always enduring and always sure. This is what allows the heart to give itself away to him. And

at the same time, to give oneself away simply means to allow oneself to be looked upon, and to let this gaze reveal the inner truth and bring it forth fully into the light.

Still another reality begins to mature here in this place of spiritual poverty, in this abandonment of oneself to God's loving and enduring gaze. It is simply an element of what is already given in the Love received and cradling, and yet a blossoming of love outward from this endless source. When the heart is given away to God, opened to his gaze, then it learns to give itself away to others too, totally and unreservedly.

The heart, touched by the divine touch, wounded and healed by the divine Beauty, and at rest in the majesty of the Trinity's Love, expands within the dimensions of this eternal Light. Yes, as it is seen it begins to see, and, knowing what it means to give itself away to God, it gives itself away, also, to every thirsting child of God. It's every moment becomes a response, in childlike receptivity, wonder, and contemplation, to the reality that comes to it from without—touching and awakening in it a reciprocal gift. But this gift, indeed, first of all, is simply making one's heart a dwelling place, a home, for the other—a space where they are accepted, loved, and cherished unreservedly. Only then, from this womb-like mystery of receptivity, can a reciprocal gift—in word, in act, in movement—be born.

The human heart, *a little child infinitely loved*, has been touched by the divine Beauty that ravishes. Thus it becomes more and more, through the movement of reciprocal surrender and the nakedness of trust before God's loving gaze, *a true spouse of the heavenly Bridegroom*. And this union, in which two are made one flesh, one spirit, in a Love that binds them together indissolubly, brings forth in the heart an expansive fruit of love for each person, and for all. The heart becomes mother or father—conceiving through God's gift, this heavenly seed, and giving through the transparency of the Father's eternal Light—*a mother or father for the many children of God within this world*, each of whom is breathtakingly beautiful and precious, cradled and held by eternal Love, and yearning to return, fully, into the joy and peace of this abiding embrace.

PART II

MEETING THE GAZE OF LOVE

MEDITATION 7

Those Healing Eyes of Love

The human heart bears within itself an infinite thirst. This is not a thirst that has been learned or acquired or chosen, but is “given” with our very existence. Is this not the nature of a thirst, even on the natural and physical level? Thirst is a spontaneous longing for something that we lack, something that is necessary for our life and growth and flourishing. Indeed, thirst is a most basic experience from the beginning of our life—for we depend on the liquid that we receive from our mother from our very conception in her womb, and then on her nourishing breast after birth.

But this earthly and physical nourishment alone is not enough to satisfy us, for it is but a basis and a symbol of a deeper nourishment: *the drink of love freely and unconditionally given*. This, indeed, is the “sacramental” meaning of the little child’s dependence upon her mother—her utter need to cry out, to open herself, and to receive from another for even her most basic necessities. Incarnate in our experience from the first moments of life, therefore, is the reality of love—a love that is given to us and a love that we desperately need and long for.

Nonetheless, this love of the human “other,” of mother or father, of friend or spouse, is not enough to quench the longing within us. This is not only because others are imperfect, and their love can often falter and fail us, or even turn into the opposite, hurting and wounding us. No, it is more simply and basically because our hearts have been made for One alone whose love is infinite...who is himself infinite Love. It is he alone who in his Beauty will ravish our heart with endless delight, who in his Goodness will fulfill our every longing, and who in his Truth will take us up and cradle us unceasingly within the embrace of perfect Love.

Saint Augustine’s words, therefore, ring so profoundly true: “You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” But why does God give us such a profound thirst if it is so difficult

to fulfill, and causes so much pain, anxiety, and restlessness? This is, sadly, a question that lies in a way at the foundation of our culture, not as an explicit movement against God, but as a profound sadness and discouragement regarding the possibility of finding the true and lasting fulfillment of our desires. So many people in our world experience an oppressive sadness, a heaviness of heart that recoils from yearning for greatness and nobility, for the exalted vocation of being united in love to the God of the universe.

No longer is this really seen as a possibility, as a feasible option for us—neither as the central and driving goal of our life nor as a principle that gives meaning to the concrete decisions of daily life. But what happens whenever we cease to embrace this thirst for God, whenever we cease to pursue the face of divine Beauty which can alone satisfy us? Then we disperse ourselves among the many partial sources of nourishment in this world, hoping that we can find in them the water to still the anguished restlessness and painful longing within our hearts. Or perhaps we just begin to live under the supposition that there is no hope for us to find true and enduring happiness, and live our lives not as a gift, but as a burdensome task.

What are we to do, then, in the face of all of this, in the face of a world of which God can say, as he said of his people of old: “they have forsaken me and carved out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water?” (Jer 21:13). We touched upon it with the word *gift* above. The truth is that *thirst* is not the most basic or fundamental reality of our existence. No, the most fundamental reality, the most basic experience, is *pure and gratuitous gift*. As we see in the image of the little child, our thirst is but a response to a Love that already precedes us, sustains us, envelops and carries us. We have come from Love; we are enfolded in Love; and we are called to return to Love. The deep and abiding thirst of our hearts is but the seal that this Love has impressed upon us—a thirst that has become painful because of the effects of sin, which is precisely our turning away from the embrace of Love.

In other words, our thirst is not a burden to be thrown off, but a gift to be received, for it is the expression of our capacity for union with God. It is a sign of our vocation to intimacy with the One who is infinite Beauty, Goodness, Truth, and Love—who indeed is a Communion of Persons united in eternal embrace, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If the

thirst hurts, if it tears at our hearts with longing, this is not because God has positively willed it so, but because our world has fallen away from the union with Love for which it was created.

We find ourselves now in exile from the “promised land,” which flowed with the streams of God’s life-giving Love, and we now wander through the desert on a long journey toward our true home once again. But indeed God is still near to us—intimately near—and his living water flows within our hearts. However, we have lost the ability to drink, the ability to make living contact with this spring flowing within us. Instead of abiding at the center of our being where God dwells, we are exiled to the surface. We find ourselves dwelling on the periphery, among the many superficial and imperfect things of this world, none of which can fully give us what we seek.

Yet all of these things speak of him, for they came from him. Nonetheless, they cannot bring us the fullness of his loving presence, they cannot unveil before us his face. Our hearts have become incapable of this loving vision of the countenance of God, of the radiant mystery of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in their endless life of perfect love. We glimpse him, here, there, and everywhere, as if peeking at us through the veil of created reality—and touching our hearts with his loving glance. Through this glance he reawakens in us yet more deeply our thirst, our longing for him. But he does this only to bring us closer to the joy he yearns to give us—to open us to the gift he desires to bestow.

This loving glance awakens in us a twofold awareness. First of all, as I glimpse those loving eyes looking upon me, peeking through the veil of my life and experiences, through the beauty of reality, I experience first of all that *I am loved, I am known, I am desired*. I glimpse again the truth that my life is not a burden or a task, but a gift flowing from the loving hands and heart of Another. It is a gift from One who loves me tenderly and intimately, and whose love is a profound form of thirst...*thirst for me*. Yes, God yearns for me infinitely more than I yearn for him, and my thirst is but a response to his own thirst for me.

Secondarily, when I allow myself to be looked upon in this way, then I notice that I immediately get back in touch with the deepest desires of my own heart. Yes, his loving glance begins to draw me back from exile in the superficial to the place of depth, to the sanctuary of my own heart where I am alone before him. I glimpse his love, and in glimpsing his

love I also glimpse his tremendous Beauty...and this beauty speaks profoundly to my heart. It touches the thirst implanted in me from the very first moment of my existence, this “nostalgia” for the home of God’s loving embrace from which I have come, but from which I find myself estranged. But it touches me in such a way that it gives it an “object,” a focus, a goal. No longer do I thirst blindly for “something or other,” but rather for the One whose beauty I have glimpsed, and whose beauty has touched and ravished my heart.

It is now a Person for whom my heart longs—a Person who is glimpsed and yet who still remains hidden, still beyond my grasp—and I can cry out:

O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where no water is. (Psalm 63:1)

Or I can cry out with the bride in the *Spiritual Canticle* of Saint John of the Cross:

Where have you hidden,
Beloved, and left me moaning?
You fled like the stag
after wounding me;
I went out calling you, but you were gone.
O woods and thickets,
planted by the hand of my Beloved!
O green meadow,
coated, bright, with flowers,
tell me, has he passed by you?
Pouring out a thousand graces,
he passed these groves in haste;
and having looked at them,
with his image alone,
clothed them in beauty.
Ah, who has the power to heal me?
now wholly surrender yourself!
Do not send me
any more messengers,
they cannot tell me what I must hear.

All who are free
tell me a thousand graceful things of you;
all wound me more
and leave me dying
of, ah, I-don't-know-what behind their stammering. (Stanzas
1, 4-7)

He has looked upon me with his eyes of love, and this glance has penetrated my being—revealing to me his immense love for me, and in this love has wounded my heart with a love and longing for him in return, who becomes the one Beloved and the ardent longing of my heart. Yes, his look has wounded me, but it has wounded only to heal—for it has reopened my heart to the gift that alone can give me life. It has awakened the thirst which he so deeply thirsts to satisfy with himself.

I become aware, as Saint Augustine says, that I am created for the One who is profoundly close to me, and yet from whom, for so long, I have been far away:

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

This encounter with Love does not discourage; it does not cast down. Rather, it lifts me up; it raises me above myself toward the One who beckons me tenderly yet powerfully. Yes, it gives me the ability to continue the Psalmist's prayer:

So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
Because your merciful love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.
My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

(Psalm 63:2-4, 8)

Now, through my encounter with the glance of Love, my life has new direction and purpose...and yes, it bears a new-born hope. Because my very longing is but a response to God's longing for me, because my life is his gift already given, and because my path is already enfolded on all sides by his abiding presence, I can progress forward toward the day when I will finally know him, face-to-face, in the full light of vision, and experience completely the joy and intimacy of his embrace.

In a word, the path of loving relationship with God opens up before me. And this path opens my eyes to see the whole creation, myself, and every other person in a new light. Yes, I begin to see all things within the radiance that emanates from the gaze of the One who is perfect Love. All things bear his mark, his seal, his touch, and I rejoice to see him in them, while reaching out through them and beyond them for him...for the Beloved himself. I see in every person one who has been born from Love, who is cradled in the mysterious, hidden, and yet utterly real arms of Love, and who is called to eternal intimacy with Love.

My life is now situated within the context of Love, from its earliest beginning to its last moment, and at every moment in between. Indeed, the Love that surrounds and irradiates me and the whole creation is eternal, and therefore he is fully present to me, even if I am not yet capable of being fully present to him. But knowing where I have come from and where I am going, I can welcome the gift that unceasingly comes to me—the gift of his mysterious presence and his hidden gaze at every moment—and let myself be led toward the consummation of union that awaits me at the end.

What is this “path” of loving relationship with God—and in him with every other person and the whole creation—that unfolds before me? It is the path of *prayer*. Yes, I am being taken up by the mystery of prayer, which is meant to fill and transfigure my whole life and its every moment. My life has been created by God in order to be an existence of unceasing prayer, in love, gratitude, and praise. And this prayer, this existence, is to reach consummation when it passes over into the Prayer of Eternity, which is none other than the loving dialogue of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who immerse me in the very heart of their own loving embrace.

MEDITATION 8

Seeing and Abiding: Two Movements in the Flow of Love

The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned, and saw them following, and said to them, "What do you desire?" And they said to him, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying; and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour.

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. And he found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathaniel, and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. Nathaniel said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." Jesus saw Nathaniel coming to him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" Nathaniel said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathaniel answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You shall see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man." (John 1:35-39, 43-51)

In the first chapter of John's Gospel, there is a deep interrelationship between "seeing" and "abiding." The experience of beholding another in love awakens in the heart a deep longing for union with the one who is seen, whose beauty touches the beholder. The two disciples, Andrew

and John, see Jesus and follow him, drawn by his mystery and his beauty, and they ask him where he is staying. His response is to turn and look upon them, to gaze upon them deeply, and then to invite them to a deeper seeing still: “Come and see.”

We see the same thing in the encounter with Nathaniel, who feels himself to be intimately “known” by Jesus. He experiences the gaze of love that pierces the depths of his being and awakens in him a profound faith. In response to Christ’s gaze, Nathaniel proclaims the incarnate Son’s divinity, and leaves all to follow him. He enters into the magnetic movement of the Lord’s love, allowing himself to be drawn, just as the other disciples have allowed themselves to be drawn before him. Each one of them, touched by the loving gaze of Christ, have had their eyes opened to gaze upon Christ in return. And in this mutual gaze, they are enabled to surrender all; the thirst, the desire, the confidence awakens in them that leads them to abandon themselves entirely into Christ’s loving hands, and to make him their very Life. From now on, he is Everything for them...their Beloved, their All, their Hope and Joy.

In a word, from now on they make their home within the love of Christ, against his Sacred Heart. This is what it means, most basically, to be a disciple. It is to be one who leans against the breast of Jesus and listens intently to the beating of his Heart. But this resting and listening is also, as we have seen, a mystery of beholding, in which we look at the One who is always lovingly looking upon us.

Yes, the mystery of prayer is a mutual beholding—in which God’s gaze awakens our own loving gaze upon him. It is also a mutual “listening” to the heart of the beloved. God is always intimately attuned to our slightest heartbeat, the slightest movements of our soul, as if his ear were pressed against our chest. All that occurs within us finds a profound reverberation within him and his own Heart. And, on the other hand, he yearns to be able to share his Heart with us, to open up to us his own deepest desires and aspirations, so that they may find a home within us. This deep heart-listening is part of what it means to abide against his breast in contemplative love. We rest in him, silent and still, listening deeply to the surging of his Heart, while he gazes upon us with infinite tenderness and love.

We see this mystery of “beholding” and “abiding” expressed beautifully in the Song of Songs. In the Song, the bride says:

Draw me after you, let us make haste.
The King has brought me into his chambers. ...
With great delight I sat in his shadow,
and his fruit was sweet to my taste.
He brought me to the banqueting house,
and his banner over me was love. ...
I am my Beloved's,
and his desire is for me. (Song 1:4; 2:3-4; 7:10)

This yearning to be drawn, to make haste into the chambers of the King, is the same mystery that is being realized in the experience of the disciples. Rather than sitting under the shadow of John the Baptist, or under the "fig tree," they are now placing their lives entirely in Christ's care and sitting in his shadow, eating the fruit of his Love that he so freely offers them. To sit in the shadow of the Lord, to rest in his shade...this is the great invitation of God's Love.

But what, more precisely, is this "fruit" of Love that we receive as we consent to sit in the shadow of Christ, leaning against his breast? It is but the mystery of "abiding" in him, and he in us: *the gift of deep and lasting intimacy*. Jesus opens the way to this intimacy through the loving words he pronounces to us, words that reveal the truth of what he sees as he looks upon us, what he feels as he listens to our heart.

Behold, you are beautiful, my love;
 behold you are beautiful...
You have ravished my heart...
you have ravished my heart
 with a glance of your eyes. (Song 1:15; 4:1, 9)

These words touch a deep and intimate place in us, and correspond with our most profound and interior desires. Do we not desire to truly be *seen* by another, to be seen and understood and loved? And yet we are also afraid of this. We feel insecure about what the other will see, fearful that, if they look deep enough they will be repulsed by what they see and will pull away. Surely, if we bear this shame within us, and want to hide ourselves from the piercing gaze of another, our fear and shame must be justified, right? But God draws near to us in Christ; he gazes upon us intensely and lovingly. His gaze sees and knows all...and his love does not lessen or draw back. No, his very gaze of love creates us in our

unique and unrepeatabe beauty...a beauty that belongs to no other person in the whole of creation, fashioned in us directly by the creative love and tenderness of God.

To welcome this gaze, to allow it to irradiate the very depths of my being, the most hidden recesses of my heart, is to find myself gradually healed and set free by Love. Yes, this gaze touches me in my own authentic personal truth, and in touching me this gaze awakens me to life. God says to me: "Behold, you are beautiful, my love; behold you are beautiful." This is not a lie, or an exaggeration, or a wish...no, it is the simple truth of God's vision, which sees in me what I myself cannot see, what is covered over with shame and fear and regret. His eyes of love illumine my darkness, and this gaze communicates to me his entire loving presence, which enfolds me in itself. I find myself nestled within the enveloping Love of God...upheld, sheltered, and carried by him who is the perfect Lover.

This loving gaze of God awakens in me the truth of who I am in his eyes; it gives me the confidence to live in this identity, this truth of *being loved*. Also, it awakens in me the desire and the ability to turn my gaze to God in response, *to look into the eyes of the One who looks upon me*. And what does God experience in this reciprocal gaze? What does he feel when he sees in my eyes my own love and longing for him, as frail as it may be, when he sees welling up in my gaze the depths of my soul? He has told me what he feels, the profound way in which he is affected and touched by me: "You have ravished my heart with a glance of your eyes."

Ah...to ravish the Heart of God with my own gaze! What a loving God we have! And what profound things this means about who I am for him! God, by his gaze, ravishes my heart with the gentle yet powerful touch of his Love...and through this touch he awakens my heart to gaze upon him in return: *and in this mutual beholding is born an unspeakable intimacy, as if, through the eyes, our hearts are knit together as one in love.*

MEDITATION 9

Bathed in the Light of His Face

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,
for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they shall be satisfied.
Blessed are the merciful,
for they shall obtain mercy.
Blessed are the pure of heart,
for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they shall be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted
for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
(Matthew 5:3-10)

In the ancient monastic tradition, the goal of the Christian life was understood as being the invitation to share in the Beatitude pronounced by Christ: “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.” It is this vision of the beauty of the Divine Countenance which gave meaning to the lifetime striving of the monks and hermits of the desert, and which was the source and wellspring of all the other Beatitudes. This blessing from the words of Christ, situated as it is at the core or climax of the Beatitudes, casts its light both forwards and backwards—forwards to the blessing on the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and the merciful; and backwards, to the blessing on the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for the

sake of righteousness.

In a word, the vision of God's ineffable Beauty is the deepest desire of the human heart, and poverty, mourning, meekness, hunger, thirst, and mercy all prepare the heart to welcome this gift from Almighty God. And when this great gift is received in a heart that is pure, then it brings with it the great blessing of *peace*. This peace is the sign and seal of God's presence within the heart of his beloved child—a child who has come to abide in the undying truth of the Father's Love—and therefore becomes also a source of peace for their brothers and sisters near and far. As Saint Seraphim of Sarov said: "When one soul finds peace, thousands of others around it will find it as well." There is such a thing as *spiritual magnetism*, which is invisible but entirely real, such that when one heart allows itself to be raised up into the embrace of the Trinity, the whole world is raised with it.

Further, when such a heart enters into the vision of God, into the purity of his embrace, then it discovers an unshakable stillness and serenity, which allows it even to undergo suffering and persecution in the likeness of the Savior and relying entirely upon his grace. And this serenity of love is not a gift for the individual alone, but also makes them a rock of strength and consolation for all the lost and lonely hearts within this world.

But can we really still speak today of the "vision of God" as the ultimate goal of human and Christian life? Haven't we rather discovered that what really matters is *fraternal love* and *active charity*? The impulse toward contemplative repose in the embrace of God, toward the purity of loving vision, is often seen as old-fashioned, rooted in an ancient Greek philosophy not yet purified by the newness of the Gospel. Or it is seen as individualistic and criticized as a merely subjective spirituality that doesn't take account of the solidarity that exists among all the members of humanity and our co-responsibility for one another. True love doesn't consist in seeking the vision of God for oneself, it is said, but rather in spending one's life for the good of others.

On the surface these objections seem plausible, but on deeper inspection they reveal themselves to be profoundly superficial. They are superficial because they place God, as it were, in the background; and instead they focus upon the initiative and activity of humanity, as if this were what is truly decisive. The innate human desire for infinite Love is there-

fore squashed down to the size of philanthropy, to the point where it is said that God is not found in personal prayer, but rather in love of neighbor. Not in praying alone to God do we find access to authentic love, but only in the faces of our brothers and sisters.

Now, we most definitely do find the face of God in the faces of our brothers and sisters! We most definitely can—and must—approach our loving God through loving others and being loved by them, such that Saint John can write: “He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?” And yet there is an *inner flame* that must be ignited in the heart, which is the condition for brotherly love to be truly and authentically Christian. The nature of Christian love is that it extends to the infinite horizon of God’s Love, for it is born from the bosom of the Trinity who has loved us first, and, in loving us, calls us to intimacy with himself. Only when our love opens itself to the infinite Beauty of God, as the only resting-place of our restless hearts, can it also open itself to the expansiveness of love for our brothers and sisters within this world.

In order for love to be intensely centered upon man, it must first be completely centered upon God, as John Paul II expressed so beautifully in his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*:

I devoted the encyclical *Redemptor hominis* to the truth about man, a truth that is revealed to us in its fullness and depth in Christ. A no less important need in these critical and difficult times impels me to draw attention once again in Christ to the countenance of the “Father of mercies and God of all comfort” (2 Cor 1:3). We read in the Constitution *Gaudium et spes*: “Christ the new Adam...fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his lofty calling,” and does it “in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love.” The words that I have quoted are clear testimony to the fact that man cannot be manifested in the full dignity of his nature without reference—not only on the level of concepts but also in an integrally existential way—to God. Man and man’s lofty calling are revealed in Christ through the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love. ...

The more the Church’s mission is centered upon man—the more it is, so to speak, anthropocentric—the more it must be confirmed

and actualized theocentrically, that is to say, be directed in Jesus Christ to the Father. While the various currents of human thought both in the past and at the present have tended and still tend to separate theocentrism and anthropocentrism, and even to set them in opposition to each other, the Church, following Christ, seeks to link them up in human history, in a deep and organic way. And this is also one of the basic principles, perhaps the most important one, of the teaching of the last Council. (n. 1)

How can we go about seeking to “link up” the focus on humanity with the focus on God, and to avoid setting them in opposition to one another? The Pope himself gives the explanation: *only in the mystery of the Father and his love does the true calling of man become clear*. In other words, we cannot understand ourselves unless we open ourselves to the loving gaze of the Father, who reveals to us, in this gaze, both ourselves and his own divine mystery. Only in knowing God can we know ourselves. Or even more basically, only *in being known by God* can we come to know ourselves—to understand ourselves as he understands us, bathed in the radiance of his love and mercy. And this being known by and knowing God—this relationship of reciprocal love with God—is the wellspring of authentic love for our brothers and sisters, who we can thereby see bathed in the light of this same love that comes from the countenance of the Father.

How beautiful is this connection between the human heart and the heart of the Father...which meet and become united within the mystery of a single Love! And this Love has become incarnate in Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son who is always in the bosom of the Father and yet has come among us to open up the Home of the Trinity to be our own dwelling-place. Yes, only Jesus Christ truly reveals to us who we are, for in his gaze we experience the loving gaze of the heavenly Father, and in him we see, united in inseparable unity, the mystery of both God and humanity, knit together as one within the sinews of his own Sacred Heart.

In raising our eyes to Jesus, therefore, we can discern the contours of our own vocation and the truth of our human existence. What, then, was the driving force of Jesus' whole life and his deepest desire? *It was the Father's love for him, and his reciprocal love for the Father*. Jesus knew that he was *beloved*, and he lived unceasingly from this place of

belovedness—from the Father’s enveloping embrace, and from this *mutual beholding* of love. This was the source of all of his thoughts, actions, words, and desires, which flowed from the Father and returned to the Father.

When Jesus speaks of the blessedness of those who see God, he is therefore speaking of those whose hearts come to share in his own filial, childlike attitude before the Father, his own contemplative gaze, in which they enter into the radiance of his vision. He is speaking of those whose hearts allow themselves to be enkindled once again with the fire of divine love, at rest only in the heart of the Trinity’s embrace, and yet from this very burning desire spreading out spontaneously to each and every child of God.

In summary, the whole of Jesus’ life and mission flows from the place of his intimacy with the Father and returns to this place. The intimate bond of love uniting the Father and the Son, this Kiss that inseparably binds them together, is the true heart of all reality, that “point” from which all of creation and history spring.

Further, every single desire of the Son is an expression of his central and all-encompassing desire: his desire for the Father. Whether it is his deep human love for his friends—for Martha, Mary, Lazarus, or John the beloved—or his earnest longing to lay down his life to redeem us, or his simple delight in the beauty of nature, all of this springs from his contemplative gaze upon the countenance of his Father and his profound awareness of being gazed upon by the Father. The light of this mutual gaze irradiates his whole life and bathes it in its splendor, revealing the true value and meaning of every created thing, and especially the awesome dignity and unique beauty of each individual person.

What does this mean for what we have been saying about our own lives? First of all, it reveals that we have not been created and chosen by God for some ministry or mission, but *for intimacy with the Trinity*. When God looks lovingly upon us, his intention toward us is not one of “commissioning,” of making us an instrument for the good of our brethren, but rather an intention of pure and loving desire to unite us to himself. God’s love is the intense movement of his heart toward us, a movement of thirst to join himself to us in intimate love—an intimate love deeper and closer than any human intimacy, even the greatest.

Further, this loving desire of God is directed at each of us uniquely

and unrepeatably, as if we were the only person he ever created. In a real sense, we are...for each individual is so unique, so profoundly special in the mystery that he has created us to be, that there is no comparison between one person and another. He loves me, truly, as he loves no other person...and with a love that is infinite and unbounded, that is, with his entire Self, infinite in majesty, beauty, and tenderness.

From this awesome desire and call of God, all the other elements of our lives spring as from an ever-flowing spring. When we ourselves allow him to gaze upon us, and through this gaze to awaken our reciprocal gaze, our ceaseless pursuit of the divine Beauty, then we can also open out to our brothers and sisters and share in the ardent mission of Christ. And this mission consists precisely in bringing the light of God's gaze to those who do not know it, and therefore in welcoming them as we have been welcomed by God, making our hearts an open space, a home, in which they can find the love, the acceptance, and the affirmation that they so deeply desire.

True fraternal love among humanity is therefore but an expression of the mutual beholding of the Father and the Son, and of God and each human heart, in that we come to see and to embrace one another within the light of God who enfolds us all together. Yes, at the very heart of this unique, intense, and everlasting love of God for each individual person, we find the space in which we can authentically encounter one another in the most profound and intimate way. And this encounter, because it occurs within the very light of the Trinity's love, blossoms spontaneously in a breathtaking intimacy, which is the fulfillment of the prayer of Christ:

I pray, Father, that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory which you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which you have given me in your love for me before the foundation of the world. (John 17:21-24)

Our invitation, therefore, is to immerse ourselves in the Heart of Jesus Christ, who is the beloved Son of the Father from all eternity, and who has come to us in order to take us with him, back into his home in the Father's embrace. We are gently summoned to lean against his bosom, as he leans against the bosom of the Father, and to allow him to take us up into himself. In doing this, he will touch, heal, purify, and transform our hearts, so that we can behold, in him and with him, the countenance of our loving Father. Caught up into the movement of love that ever passes between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we shall behold ourselves in the light of God's gaze, and we will see all things in this light. Yes, this light will be our very life and our endless joy: to gaze eternally upon the face of the One who is eternally gazing upon us with such infinite tenderness and loving delight.

MEDITATION 10

He Who Sees Me Sees the Father

If the ultimate goal of the Christian life is to “see the face of God,” if this is indeed God’s own ardent and passionate desire for each of his children, then what does this really mean? What does it really mean to see God? Is it not impossible in this life, as God himself said to Moses: “No man shall see me and live”? Indeed, this direct, face-to-face vision will not occur until the next life, when we pass through the boundary of death and into the limitless mystery of Infinite Love. This Love will enfold us within itself and make it possible for us to gaze, with eyes wide open, upon the Face of God. Only then shall we behold, in unmediated fullness, the direct radiance of his Beauty, shining with Goodness and Truth, piercing our hearts with an ineffable and endless joy.

This final Day will be a day never ending, a day that is the consummation of all of our desires and aspirations, the quelling of all our fears, doubts, and questionings. This Day will be the eternal day of vision. It will be the perfect ecstasy of love in which, touched by the gaze of God which penetrates our whole being to its innermost depths, we are drawn out of ourselves and immersed in him. We will be immersed in the infinite Ocean of the Trinity’s delight, in the perfect communion that exists between the Father, Son, and Spirit, and they in turn will fully inhabit us, filling and pervading our whole being. And, finally, within the all-encompassing mystery of this Light, we shall behold, we shall know, we shall rest, in intimate unity among ourselves, in a heart-to-heart communication with every child of God.

This is the “missing puzzle-piece” to our enigmatic existence, to the restless longing in the depths of our hearts. This is the Homeland for which our homeless hearts long, and of which they have, as it were, a “memory,” the memory of our creation through the gaze of God’s love in the beginning of our life. We are each one of us a unique irradiation of the divine Light, and we therefore thirst to be joined together to the

Fullness. May such an invitation, such a destiny, awaken in our hearts a profound desire and an ardent hope. May it awaken in us an expectation, a confidence, and a willingness to surrender ourselves to the One who calls us and indeed already cradles us within himself.

This is the longing and the childlike confidence that has been awakened in so many souls throughout the history of salvation, from the time of the ancient patriarchs of the Old Covenant until the present day. Let us quote two examples from the history of the Church. The first is Saint Columban, an Irish monk of the 7th Century, who expresses his own thirst to see the face of Christ, to be possessed by his Love, and begs for the grace to keep vigil in expectation of this Day:

How blessed, how fortunate, *are those servants whom the Lord will find watchful when he comes.* Blessed is the time of waiting when we stay awake for the Lord, the Creator of the universe, who fills all things and transcends all things.

How I wish he would awaken me, his humble servant, from the sleep of slothfulness... How I wish he would enkindle me with that fire of divine love. The flames of his love burn beyond the stars; the longing for his overwhelming delights and the divine fire ever burn within me!

How I wish I might deserve to have my lantern always burning at night in the temple of my Lord, to give light to all who enter the house of my God. Give me, I pray you, Lord, in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son and my God, that love that does not fail so that my lantern, burning within me and giving light to others, may be always lighted and never extinguished.

Jesus, our most loving Savior, be pleased to light our lanterns, so that they might burn for ever in your temple, receiving eternal light from you, the eternal light, to lighten our darkness and to ward off from us the darkness of the world.

Give your light to my lantern, I beg you, my Jesus, so that by its light I may see that holy of holies which receives you as the eternal priest entering among the columns of your great temple. May I ever see you only, look on you, long for you; may I gaze with love on you alone, and have my lantern shining and burning always in your presence.

Loving Savior, be pleased to show yourself to us who knock, so that in knowing you we may love only you, love you alone, desire you alone, contemplate only you day and night, and always think of you. Inspire in us the depth of love that is fitting for you to receive as God. So may your love pervade our whole being, possess us completely, and fill all our senses, that we may know no other love but love for you who are everlasting. May our love be so great that the many waters of sky, land and sea cannot extinguish it in us: *many waters could not extinguish love.* (Second Reading in the Office of Readings, Tuesday of the 28th Week in Ordinary Time)

The next example is Saint Gregory of Nyssa, one of the pillars of the early Church, who speaks of the sense of expectation, the thrill, the “vertigo” that one experiences on considering this awesome invitation to “behold the face of God”:

Consider the feelings of a man who looks down into the depths of the sea from the top of a mountain. This is similar to my own experience when the voice of the Lord from on high, as from a mountaintop, reached the unfathomable depths of my intellect. Along the seacoast, you may often see mountains facing the sea. It is as though they had been sliced in two, with a sheer drop from top to bottom. At the top a projection forms a ledge overhanging the depths below. If a man were to look down from that ledge, he would be overcome by dizziness. In this same way my soul grows dizzy when it hears the great voice of the Lord saying: *Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God.*

“The vision of God is offered to those who have purified their hearts,” he says. Look at the dizziness that affects the soul drawn to contemplating the depths of these statements. If God is life, then he who does not see God does not see life. Yet God cannot be seen; the apostles and prophets, inspired by the Holy Spirit, have testified to this. Into what straits is man’s hope driven! Yet God does raise and sustain our flagging hopes. He rescued Peter from drowning and made the sea into a firm surface beneath his feet. He does the same for us; the hands of the Word of God are stretched out to us when we are out of our depths, buffeted and lost in speculation. Grasped firmly in his hands, we shall be without fear: *Blessed are*

the pure of heart, he says, for they shall see God. (Second Reading of the Office of Readings, 12th Week in Ordinary Time)

How can we begin, already in this life, to approach this vision? How can we prepare our hearts for this transforming encounter, this blessed union? God is so great, and we are so little, how can we ever overcome the infinite distance between his Majesty and our misery, his Immensity and our smallness. The answer lies in Jesus Christ...in the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection of the Son of God. As we saw in our previous meditation, it is the incarnate Son who reconciles God and humanity, binding them together within his own Sacred Heart. Therefore, in drawing near to this Heart we draw near to the Furnace of Divine Love present within our world. Flaming forth from Jesus are the rays of eternal Light, unveiling before us the mystery of the Father and his Love... the mystery of the Trinity in its eternal and life-giving intimacy.

“In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him.” Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?” (John 14:2-10)

Jesus speaks of bringing us into the dwelling-place of the Father’s Love, into the intimacy that he shares always with the Father as his beloved Son. He has gone to prepare a place for us, and will come again to take us to himself, so that where he is, we may also be. This is his profound desire, as he himself prayed: “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which you have given me in your love for me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24). Yet indeed in going to the Father he has not left

us, for he still dwells with us through the power of the Spirit, unveiling his mysterious presence to us in so many ways...in prayer, in the depths of silent love, in fraternal charity and interpersonal communion, in the Sacraments and the teaching of his holy Church, in the Word of Scripture. Yes, he dwells in the inmost depths of the heart of each one of us through grace.

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.” Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?” Jesus answered him, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” (John 13:16-23)

And in this way he is still, for all, “the way, the truth, and the life” by which we go to the Father; and our contemplation of the beauty of his face reveals to us the face of the heavenly Father. “He who has seen me has seen the Father,” for the Son is utterly transparent to the radiance of the Father’s Love. Therefore, in allowing him to gaze lovingly upon us, to pierce the depths of our being with the light of his glance, we become capable of entering into a living communion with God and beginning, in faith, to see the Trinity already in this life.

Now if the dispensation of death [the Old Covenant], carved in letters on stone, came with such splendor that the Israelites could not look at Moses’ face because of its brightness, fading as this was, will not the dispensation of the Spirit be attended with greater splendor? For if there was splendor in the dispensation of condemnation, the dispensation of righteousness must far exceed it in splendor. Indeed, in this case, what once had splendor has come to

have no splendor at all, because of the splendor that surpasses it. For if what faded away came with splendor, what is permanent must have much more splendor. Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not see the end of the fading splendor. But their minds were hardened; for to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds; but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 2:7-18)

This is the invitation that lies before us, already, here and now: *to be transformed from glory to glory by gazing into the countenance of the Lord. We are to be transformed into the very image that, like mirrors, we reflect: the image of the beloved Son of the Father.* This is the freedom, the filial boldness that we have through Christ. God has opened himself entirely to us, laying bare his heart before us in Jesus Christ, and this very vulnerability on his part awakens and elicits our own vulnerability before him. It is an invitation to open ourselves to him, to lay ourselves completely before him, and to receive his loving gaze piercing into the depths of our being. We can hear him say to us: *Do you trust me?* He extends his hand to us, so that, if we are willing to place our hand in his, he may take us with him, beyond the veil that separates us, into the intimacy of his loving embrace, into the radiance of his own vision.

MEDITATION II

To be Pure as He is Pure

In the Mass readings for the Solemnity of All Saints a particular theme emerges very strongly. It is the theme of “purity of heart.” In the first reading we hear of the great multitude in heaven, the members of which are described as those who “have washed their robes and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb.” Immediately after this, it is said:

Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night within his temple; and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Rev 7:14-17)

It is amazing to see that the Lamb has become the Shepherd! He who was “led like a lamb to the slaughter and did not open his mouth” has ransomed from the jaws of death a flock to be his own...and he leads them from the darkness into light, from hunger and thirst into the abundance of his bounty, described as “springs of living water” and the consolation of love in which he wipes “every tear from their eyes.” Through his redeeming death he has “gathered together into unity the children of God who were scattered abroad” (cf. Jn 11:52). They are gathered together into the sheepfold of his love through a washing with his own cleansing Blood...through standing at this Fountain of Mercy, the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ opened as he hangs upon the Cross, and receiving its healing and saving streams which pour forth for them.

But as we progress more deeply into the readings of this day, the image of sheep and the sheepfold gives way to the deeper truth: adoption into the family of the Trinity, adoption as children of God. In the First Letter of Saint John, we hear:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called chil-

dren of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears that we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself just as he is pure. (1 Jn 3:1-3)

In this passage the deepest meaning of our redemption in Christ is revealed to us: *we have been made children of the heavenly Father*. In the words of John we can sense a profound and burning joy, as he gratefully exclaims: "See what love the Father has given us!" Yes, see what love, what awesome and unspeakable love! What love through which he has made us his children!

This childlike relationship with our Father is a reality already here and now. Indeed, it is the very deepest truth of our life, in which alone everything else can be understood correctly. It is the simple truth of being enfolded in God's healing grace, in his abundant love...cradled on every side by his abiding presence. And yet this gift that we have received is also preparing us for its full, glorious revelation at the end of time, when we will see Christ face to face, and therefore become fully like him as children of the Father. We will be transformed in the light of his countenance, as Saint Paul says: "We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed in his likeness from glory unto glory" (2 Cor 3:18).

This invitation and promise to behold the face of God—to see the glory of the Father shining in the face of Christ, and to gaze, with Christ, upon the face of the Father himself—this also awakens in us the desire to be "pure as he is pure." For as the Gospel of the Beatitudes says, "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8). Hearts that are blinded by sin cannot see God, for their interior eyes are shut, unable to discern the beauty of the Beautiful One, the goodness of the Good One, the truth of him who is Truth, and the Love of the God who is all Love. But Jesus has come to us to shine into our darkness, to open us to his healing and saving light. Therefore let it not be said of us: "The light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed." Instead, let it be true of us: "He who does what is true comes to the

light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God” (Jn 3:19-21).

God is inviting us to let ourselves be bathed in the radiance of his face, in the glorious light of his love. We need only step out of the darkness of our fear, our sin, in which we “hide from the face of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.” We need only open our hearts, as burdened and wounded as they are, to his piercing gaze...a gaze that does not accuse or condemn, but rather touches, embraces, heals, and transforms.

But what does it mean to be pure as he is pure? It does not mean, most fundamentally, to be impeccable in the performance of good works, to possess all the virtues in an eminent degree. It means, first of all, simply to have a heart that is open to the light of love, to welcome at every moment the gift that comes to us unceasingly from God. The essence of the sin of Adam and Eve, and of every one of us since, is precisely to close oneself off from this free gift, from the outpouring light of God which gives us all things—the whole creation, and indeed our very being as his beloved children. As we open ourselves to welcome this gift, we find that it encompasses us in its embrace, sheltering and sustaining us.

Knowing ourselves to be cradled on all sides by infinite Love, we can yield ourselves up freely and confidently to this Love, allowing it to be expressed in our life, in all our thoughts, words, and actions. In this way the purity of childlike openness before God flowers in the openness of our whole life—an openness to God’s goodness, beauty, and truth present within creation, and an openness especially to each one of our brothers and sisters in whom God lives and whom he infinitely and tenderly loves.

In speaking about “striving” for holiness, there are often two extremes that people tend to fall into. They both spring from the tendency to speak of growing in holiness as if it were a matter of our own effort, our own will power, our own achievement. The focus is primarily upon man, upon his own desires and aspirations, his own journey and struggle, fighting the “spiritual combat” for the sake of the “ideal” of sanctity. On the one hand, this leads to a kind of “Pelagianism” in which pride and complacency begin to grow in the human heart, a kind of self-righteous reliance upon oneself in which one resists and denies one’s little-

ness, one's neediness. On the other hand, there is a kind of despair or discouragement of ever attaining, or getting anywhere close, to this "ideal" of perfection. In this case, the heart is tempted to settle for mediocrity and lukewarmness, since any true holiness is ultimately inaccessible by our own efforts. This can also lead, however, to a kind of "Jansenism" in which we are ever trying to cover over the abyss of personal guilt that separates us from a distant and just God by our sacrifices, penances, and good works.

The reason that these two attitudes are so distorted, and can have such devastating effects on our relationship with God, is because they are founded on fundamentally false premises: that sanctity is our own achievement and the fruit of our own effort; that we are the primary ones seeking God, not God the One who is seeking us; that the gap between us and the "ideal" of holiness is to be closed over by our own activity; and indeed that there is such an abstract "ideal" at all. All of these premises miss the most important point: that sanctity is not a matter of some self-enclosed personal perfection, which can be gained simply by human activity or effort, but rather is a matter of *an intimate loving relationship come to full flowering*. Yes, the "ideal" of holiness is not an ideal at all—it is a Person, the Person of Jesus Christ, who invites us into his loving embrace. When we open ourselves to his invitation, when we entrust our lives into his care, then he draws us where we ourselves cannot go—into the consoling, healing, purifying, and transforming fires of God's infinite Love.

Indeed, this very Furnace of infinite Love has drawn close to us...as near as possible. It burns in the tiny Heart of that little child in the womb of Mary, in that little child born in the stable at Bethlehem, in that young man living a hidden life of love, prayer, and work in Nazareth. It burns in the Heart of that man who preaches and teaches and heals throughout the countryside of Palestine. It burns in the Heart of that man who is arrested by his own people, tortured and hung on a Cross...in this Heart that allows itself to be pierced, opening itself wide to pour forth freely the abundance of this burning Love that it contains within itself.

This fire burns in the Heart of the Risen One, who has broken the bonds of sin, suffering, and death, and has crossed over the abyss of separation caused by our infidelity, knitting us back together, like threads of

cloth re-woven, into communion with God once again. This fire burns in the Heart of the Eucharistic One, who is present under the humble and hidden appearance of bread and wine, drawing us close to him in order to unite us, in Holy Communion, to the Furnace of Love within him. He welcomes us into his most intimate embrace, sheltering us in the warmth and light of his Love.

When we accept this invitation and give ourselves to him, when we let ourselves be loved by him, he teaches us what it means to “be pure as he is pure.” Indeed, he draws us into proximity with his own Love, which itself makes us pure, if only we give our “yes” to be touched and transformed by this Love. This awesome touch, this awesome transformation, is nothing but the full expression of the Father’s immense tenderness and generosity for each one of us, in which he has created us in his image and likeness, in order to be united to him forever in the Heart of his Beloved Son.

Here, cradled in the arms of Christ, the unique and unrepeatable mystery of each one of us is brought to light, illumined by the light of Love shining from his countenance. We discover, in his gaze, who we truly are in our inmost being, in our authentic identity as a precious child of God. And this very truth of our being is set free within us, to find expression in the whole of our life...flowering in a profound and abiding intimacy with Christ, and in him with the heavenly Father, and, finally, in a deep communion with all of our brothers and sisters.

This is holiness...this intimate relationship of love touching our inmost being and enveloping our entire life. And it is not an abstract “ideal,” applied generally and impersonally to every life. Rather, it is the universal reality of eternal Love...the Love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who cradle the entire universe within their embrace! Within the tender embrace of this Love, each one of us finds our own unique personal existence sheltered, affirmed, cherished, and brought to full flowering...and, in the same moment, we find ourselves bound together in unspeakably profound intimacy with every other person, as we are all enfolded in the single Love of our God.

MEDITATION 12

Opening My Heart to the Healing Touch of God

In the last meditation I spoke about the shift from a focus on our own efforts and activity in striving for holiness to a radical childlike receptivity to God's healing and transforming touch. This is indeed an important, beautiful, and liberating experience that lies, in a profound way, at the heart of the development of our relationship with God. It is a profound healing from the wound of original sin. It is the shift from a "mature" autonomy and sense of heavy responsibility to a truly childlike attitude of radical trust and simplicity, flowering in a spirit of joy and playfulness.

This is also a shift from a focus on merely changing external actions toward a true purification and transformation of my inner heart—a place that is so deep, so intimate, that my own efforts and resolves cannot ultimately effect the change and healing that are needed. What I am invited to do, then, is both more simple and more realistic—and in a way immensely easier. In another respect, of course, it is more "difficult," since beforehand I tried to arrange everything according to my own foresight, I tried to be in control and "work on" those things that were within my grasp. But now I realize that I am invited to do something that is impossible to do on my own initiative—but precisely because of this I can throw up my hands, like a little child, and cry: "God, you're going to have to do it, because I can't!" This is sweet music to the ears of our Father.

This is the true doorway into a deepening receptivity to God that places no limits on his healing and transforming activity in my heart and my life. Before perhaps I focused on those things I thought needed changing, yet also somehow sensed that there was much more "beneath the surface" which I was not ready to face, and which I kept buried out of fear and the need to keep things "under control." The realization, however, that I cannot heal myself, in things great or small, or "pick my-

self up by the bootstraps,” is a tremendously liberating realization. This is because it allows me to throw off the heavy yoke of performance that I have carried for so long, and to open my hands, poor and receptive, to welcome what can only come as a gift from the outside.

Yes, as long as my focus remains on my own activity and effort, I encounter frustration, swinging back and forth between presumption and despair—resolving to improve and then getting cast down by my repeated failures. This attitude is deeply ingrained in me, precisely because I have lost my intimate contact with the enveloping mystery of God’s Love that cradles me at every moment, and in which alone my activity finds its meaning. Further, this cradling Love, intimately close to me at every moment, is not something static, but a living and dynamic reality ceaselessly communicating itself to me in creative and surprising ways...and with a tenderness, patience, and constancy that astonishes. The whole of the Christian life consists, in a way, in simply receiving and acquiescing to this divine activity in each moment.

Such docility and acquiescence to God’s touch are possible only when a certainty in God’s tender love and his ardent desire for my good begins to grow and mature within me. And he himself will do this if I let him.

Whenever I live from a place of fundamental distrust, fundamental insecurity, then I tend to assume that I am safer “in my own hands,” and that I have more hope of success through my own efforts than through God’s grace, which remains impalpable and hidden. This is because I am tempted to see God’s grace (in other words, his very life and activity in this world), not as the true protagonist of my life, as a force of infinite power that is immensely alive and active in every instant. Rather, I am tempted to see it as some abstract, impersonal quality that is just “there,” to be tapped into so I can achieve my own goals and overcome my faults through my continual effort and “personal training.”

However, no matter how much I try, I find myself continually confronted with my weakness and failure. In the face of this, it is easy to get frustrated and angry with God for allowing me to stumble and fall so often. If I’m trying so hard, why isn’t he bringing fruit to my efforts? But the truth of the matter is that *he is intensely at work*...and my falls are simply due to the fact that the dynamic activity of grace has not yet tak-

en complete possession of me. When I yield my heart up to him, however, his Love will not fail to possess and transfigure me. Indeed, this very surrender is something that he alone can bring to fruition in me, through the mysterious workings of his grace; I can only assent to it again and again when I find myself led to the point at which, aware of my weakness and inability, I can either grasp to control—and even resentment—or can yield my heart up without reserve to the healing touch of God’s Mercy.

Insofar as I still live the attitude that focuses on my own efforts and achievement, then my places of woundedness and struggle are places that I try to “exile” from myself, to reject or ignore by “pushing them under the rug.” On the other hand, perhaps, when I do recognize them, I engage in a ceaseless war against them, chipping away at them little by little, trying to overcome them in a continuous combat between myself and my wounds, myself and my weakness, myself and my brokenness and need. However, in doing so I am actually exiling myself from my innermost heart, from the place where God, most intimately, comes to me. This is because my weaknesses and my woundedness surge up in me precisely *from the place that most deeply needs and cries out for God...and it is precisely here that he yearns to meet me.*

Prayer then is a matter of getting in touch with the inner movements of my heart and allowing them to come to the surface, thereby opening them to God and surrendering them to his healing Love. Said more accurately: prayer is a matter of opening myself to God’s loving gaze and letting this gaze draw out into the open all in me that is buried and broken, so that the radiance cast from his eyes can illumine, heal, and transfigure it within the Divine Beauty.

What is the root of the difficulty about which we have been speaking? It arises from the tendency to get lost among the multiplicity of our experiences, our struggles, and our weaknesses, and losing sight of the primary, all-encompassing reality that gives meaning to all else. *The mystery of communion, of intimacy, of childlike restfulness in the cradling arms of God’s Love and in the peace of his tender gaze*—this is the primary, all-enfolding mystery in which all else finds its place. Even when we are not involved in the danger of a do-it-yourself attitude toward holiness, we can still focus a lot on the reality of desire, of seeking, of pursu-

ing healing in the encounter with God's Love. But this very *progression* of the spiritual life into greater health, holiness, and intimacy (the "not yet") is completely enfolded at every moment in the "already" of God's tender Love which is totally victorious from the bosom of eternity, and which cradles me in itself here and now, in every instant, in the peace and joy that come as a pure gift from him.

Indeed, precisely to the depth to which I allow myself to rest in the Father's Love, allowing him to gaze into me and cherish me as his beloved child—even and especially in my weakness, my brokenness, and my wounds—to that degree the progress of healing and transformation will spontaneously blossom. This is because it is ultimately *God's* work to heal and transform. He alone makes saints, just as he alone has made creatures and children of God. What he seeks is my "yes," my trust-filled and loving consent. This is expressed above all in the inner space of the heart where my intellect, will, and affectivity are united in the depths of my personal being: in the unspeakable reality that I refer to when I say "I." The heart is the place of decision, the place of my inmost choice for or against Love. As the Catechism says:

The heart is the dwelling-place where I am, where I live; according to the Semitic or Biblical expression, the heart is the place "to which I withdraw." The heart is our hidden center, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others; only the Spirit of God can fathom the human heart and know it fully. The heart is the place of decision, deeper than our psychic drives. It is the place of truth, where we choose life or death. It is the place of encounter, because as image of God we live in relation: it is the place of covenant. (par. 2563)

This inner "yes" of the heart, of course, is also expressed in my concrete daily choices and responses to the many situations of my life, through which God unceasingly comes to me in mystery.

But both of these forms of consent, the inner and the external, are in the last analysis simply a matter of acquiescence to the touch of God's grace which goes before, awakens, sustains, and brings to consummation. To have a heart soft and receptive to this touch (a heart of flesh!), a heart that allows God to do, always and everywhere, what he wants to do...this is the key to my healing and transformation, and indeed to my "cooperation" with God for the good of my brothers and sisters.

Let us look at our Virgin Mother. This was precisely her attitude; she is the one who was and is a pure “Yes” to God, pure loving acquiescence. And her “yes” was pronounced and lived, not in a kind of false passivity, but in a trusting and generous readiness, an active responsiveness, to the touch and the gift of God at each moment. Yes, Mary is the woman who lived always with open hands, receiving all that God gave, assenting to all that he did, and abandoning herself totally into his hands in return.

This brings us back to the beginning of this meditation, where we mentioned childhood and the spirit of playfulness. In Mary we see this beautifully. Because Mary is and knows herself to be God’s beloved daughter, she is able to receive and live each moment of life in unhesitating trust, not as a burdensome task or demand, but in gratitude and playfulness. She does not fix her eyes on suffering, nor on difficulties that may arise, nor even so much on the tasks and responsibilities entrusted to her. Rather, she keeps her eyes simply on the beauty of the Beloved, and welcomes his own loving gaze upon her...allowing all else to unfold from and within this.

Often in the writings of spiritual authors there can be an excessive focus on suffering, as if it were automatically something “good” and to be sought (as a form of sacrifice, penance, or sanctification), or even simply something deserving of our attention at all. But this attitude either leads to fear and self-pity—fear if we are not yet experiencing suffering, or self-pity if we are—or to vainglory—for example, “look how much I am suffering”—or indeed to a kind of “accumulation” of suffering and sacrifices, which focuses our eyes on entirely the wrong thing. I cannot imagine Mary “counting” the cost of anything, nor choosing what she thought “more difficult” because it was thus somehow more perfect. Rather, she kept her eyes on *God alone*, and in the light of his Love discerned what was truly most perfect, without even giving a glance to how difficult or easy it may be. Love does not calculate such things.

We see this in little children at play. When they are deeply engaged in a game, children can be almost unaware of little scrapes and bruises because their attention is somewhere else entirely. The same is true for us. When our eyes are fixed on what is Good, Beautiful, and True—on the Love of God that cradles the world—then we can truly find ourselves bigger than all the petty sufferings of daily life, and indeed than the great sufferings of existence as well, all of which have been irradiated by the re-

deeming Love of God and transformed by his saving presence. This presence and this Love have become incarnate in Christ, who entered all of our darkness and pain in his Passion, and overcame it by the abiding and unbreakable intimacy that he has with the Father. Yes, he transfigured and transformed it with the radiant light and joy of the Resurrection, precisely through his spirit of childlike playfulness and his enduring gladness of heart.

There is one more thing to mention before ending this meditation. It is also often said that adoration is the most perfect form of prayer—and that it consists in looking away from ourselves and looking upon God, simply praising him for who he is without any reference to ourselves or what he has done for us. There is a profound truth here, and I will speak of it in a moment. But first let me address a false understanding of this. There can be a kind of “extrinsic” understanding of adoration, in the sense that we are told: just submerge yourself, your desires, your personality, your wounds, and focus on and adore God alone. You don’t matter; it’s he who matters. However, the truth is that there is an intrinsic connection between these two forms of prayer, since it is only the childlike, grateful heart which can adore God truly and spontaneously (and not the slave bowing down in a forced obeisance).

So I would affirm wholeheartedly that adoration is indeed the highest form of prayer, the full flower and fruit of all prayer—but it springs from and indeed lives within all authentic forms of prayer, within every contact with God’s healing and transforming touch. This is because adoration is nothing but our joy, our trust, our gladness, and our surrender to the immensity of God’s Love. We cannot love this Love unless it has first touched us. Only when we encounter God’s loving, intimate gaze irradiating the depths of our being, unveiling to us his tenderness, his affirmation, his cherishing of us in our own unique identity—only then are we truly liberated to let go of ourselves and lose ourselves in the contemplation of his beauty. Yes, those eyes which gaze so lovingly upon us are beautiful eyes...they are indeed the eyes of Beauty, the eyes of the One who is the Source of all beauty, and to which all beauty returns. When I encounter this Divine Beauty, which is glimpsed in creation, truly but imperfectly, my heart is drawn out beyond itself (and thus brought “home” to its authentic truth), and I can occupy myself in sim-

ply loving the One who is so worthy of love, who is so immensely lovable. Yes, we find the true character of adoration, not in the spirit of a slave, but in the spirit of a child. The words of St. John Vianney beautifully express this:

I love you, O my God, and my only desire is to love you until the last breath of my life. I love you, O my infinitely lovable God, and I would rather die loving you, than live without loving you. I love you, Lord, and the only grace I ask is to love you eternally. ... My God, if my tongue cannot say in every moment that I love you, I want my heart to repeat it to you as often as I draw breath. (*Catechism* par. 2658)

Yes, adoration is the beautiful flower and fruit of our receptivity to the love that God unceasingly pours into us; it is the reciprocal gaze of love that is awakened by his own loving gaze. It is, indeed, our sharing through love in the very happiness of the Trinity—a happiness which is infinite and eternal, and which nothing can take away. This is the happiness of complete and enduring intimacy—the unspeakable embrace between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who yearn for us to share in their very own life, already now in the midst of this world, and forever in the consummation of eternal life.

MEDITATION 13

The Victory of Weakness:

Poverty Transformed into a Space of Grace

In the last meditation I spoke about the way in which God desires to come to us in the midst of our weakness and limitation, to draw near and make contact with our poverty and neediness. Sometimes we can fear to bring to God anything that is not “holy”—either because others have told us this is what we should do, or because of our own shame and sense of inadequacy—but the fact is that precisely these places of woundedness are where God wants to go, what he wants to touch directly with his healing presence. Only look at the “company” that Jesus kept! His ardent thirst was to make direct, intimate contact with the hearts and lives of sinners...to be the Light shining in their darkness, the Physician touching and healing their wounds, the Good Samaritan taking them up and caring for them, the Redeemer bearing their guilt and shame and breaking it open from within by the indestructible power of his Love.

Our invitation, therefore, is not primarily to “struggle” against our faults and disordered tendencies, as necessary as this, too, is. Rather, first of all and within all we are called by God *to come to him*, to lay our hearts, vulnerable and naked, before him. As Jesus said so tenderly and lovingly:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to the childlike; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been given to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my

yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Mt 25-30)

In a sense this is when the intimate movement of prayer truly blossoms: when we cease to pray “at a distance” from God like the Pharisee congratulating himself for his performance, and lay ourselves, misery and all, before the immense Mercy of God; when we cease to flee from his face among the many “trees of the garden” and instead allow him to look upon us in our nakedness; when we cease to demand of God that he fulfill our expectations of what we think to be best, or that he “uphold” our efforts with his grace, and instead simply lay our being before him, bare and exposed, without any limitations or conditions...giving him complete permission to do what *he*, in his infinite and tender love, knows to be best.

I say all of this, but in doing so I am aware of the truth that, *even in all of our fumbling and flight, God is still intimately present and deeply at work.* But he wants this work to receive our consent, and, indeed, he will not force our freedom or go into places into which we do not invite him. He comes to us just like he came to the houses of sinners and tax collectors: when he is invited...or at least when he is allowed—as when he saw Zacchaeus in the tree and called out, “Hurry and come down, Zacchaeus, for today I must stay at your house.”

He comes, too, to the homes of the “righteous,” like to the house of Simon the Pharisee, and yet his desire is always an intimate, personal contact of love...a contact of his healing Heart with our needy heart, a contact that flowers in the joy of gratitude and the praise of adoration. We see this powerfully in the scene that unfolds at Simon’s house. While they are at table a sinful woman comes in and bathes the feet of Jesus with her tears, drying them with her hair. “But she’s a sinner!” That’s what Simon the Pharisee thinks. “Only things that are pure, righteous, and holy should touch this great Teacher.”

But Jesus turns to Simon and says:

Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, and therefore she

has loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little. (Lk 7:44-47)

And then he turns to the woman, looking tenderly upon her and says, “Your sins are forgiven... Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (v. 49, 50). The result of this intimate contact between our misery and his Mercy is the succulent fruit of love, and the sweet fragrance of adoration! The space hollowed out in our being by the experience of forgiveness—the reality of our weakness touched, irradiated, and transformed by grace—brings forth a spontaneous liberty and joy, not as the fruit of our own efforts and accomplishments, but as the simple flowering of a loving encounter and an intimate relationship, in which Jesus, by his grace, comes to live in our inmost being, and takes us, in turn, to live within him.

Then I realize that my very sins, with which I have struggled so much, are precisely expressions of my flight from the vulnerability of God’s gaze and the nakedness of his touch. Now, in times of temptation, rather than hiding among the trees of the garden, I can open my heart, in its weakness and disorder, and invite God’s protecting and liberating presence, abandoning myself as a little child into his care, into the shelter of his loving Heart. And if I still allow myself to fall in sin, I know the Mercy of God, and I can open myself again immediately to his Love, allowing the wound of my sin to become a meeting-place with God’s grace, a space of deeper, more vulnerable encounter, and thus a space of healing and transformation.

We see this movement of prayer—as an encounter between our misery and God’s mercy, our weakness and his grace, our neediness and his care, our darkness, suffering, and death and his redeeming and saving Light—in the scene of the raising of Lazarus (cf. Jn 11:1-44). The Evangelist John, in writing about this event, is very clear about the deep and intimate love and affection that Jesus bore for Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, these three siblings from the town of Bethany. But he says that, precisely because of this love, when informed that Lazarus was ill, Jesus “stayed two days longer in the place where he was,” and only after Lazarus has already died does he come.

Martha and Mary both reproach him—or at least express their pain and confusion: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have

died.” Yes, they have faith in him; they trust in Jesus and welcome his healing presence—and yet it seems that he has been absent when they needed him the most. But Jesus knows what he is doing, and he has been, and is, intimately at work in ways that they cannot yet see and understand. He is inviting them to a deeper faith and a more radical surrender of their lives to him. In a word, he brings forth in them the profound awareness of their neediness and poverty, their absolute and desperate need for the One who alone is true Life. This is precisely because he wants to minister to this need, to bring healing into this place of greatest poverty, and to bestow life in the place of death...in an intimate encounter with Love deeper than they have had before.

Yes, Jesus prepares to make his way to Lazarus’ tomb, witnessing the anguish and grief of the sisters and of all those present, and is himself moved to tears. The Gospel says simply: “Jesus wept. And the Jews who saw him weeping said: ‘See how he loved him!’” Indeed, precisely through the tenderness of his own human Heart—a Heart that feels, knows, loves, and suffers just like our own!—Christ reveals the immense compassion of the heavenly Father. In this space divinity and humanity come together in a profound interpenetration...as the divine Compassion weds itself to our suffering, the Light pierces our darkness, and Love descends into the place where all love seems torn asunder by death.

When they come to the tomb, Jesus asks them: “Take away the stone,” but Martha objects: “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.” Ah, Martha, don’t you see that God wants to come and touch his beloved children in the place of their greatest need? Don’t hold him back because you’re ashamed at the smell! He is not put off by the places of “death” in our own life—spiritual, emotional, relational, or physical—but always sees deeper, into the intimate place of our heart created for him and radiantly beautiful in his eyes. Yes, he reaches out to touch this intimate place and to bring it to life by his healing and redeeming Mercy.

Even when it seems that he has waited, that when we call out to him he does not come, the truth is that he is already intimately and ceaselessly at work. He is inviting us to a deeper trust, a deeper receptivity, a deeper self-abandonment into the arms of his Love. He is reaching out to touch us anew, and ever more deeply, in order to heal our deepest wounds and to bring life and light where we need it the most.

We have spoken about the way that our weakness and need are transformed into a space of intimate encounter with God, who comes to us in a profound way precisely in such places. To pray therefore is truly to allow my heart to freely express itself, to let my emotions and desires, my fears and hopes—even my frustration, anger, and discouragement—to surge to the surface, if only to be laid bare before the loving and healing gaze of God. As a little child has no “filter,” but simply and unaffectedly shares all with her parents, and receives in turn all that comes from them, so too am I to be in my relationship with God. This very “opening” of my heart and my life to him is a restoration of the nakedness that was lost in original sin—and from which I flee whenever I myself choose to sin. This opening is the way in which the vulnerability of loving encounter between God and myself matures and deepens, and indeed flowers in the beauty of intimacy.

Here allow me to quote at length the wise words of a Carthusian monk, who, after speaking of the “prayer of the heart” as the meeting between our wounds and God’s merciful touch, begins to speak about what he calls “the victory of weakness.” Here is what he says:

Fear of one’s weaknesses is a basic reaction of any human being. From the day we first realize, in one respect or another, that we cannot rely on our own strength, a tendency to worry takes root which can grow into great anxiety. All that we have said up to now leads to the loss of personal security by bringing to light what we have termed our vulnerability, our hidden disorders and the limits of our created condition. Each time, then, we have said to ourselves there is only one solution—to recognize the reality of what we are and place it in the hands of the Lord.

Recall the episode of the stilling of the waters. The Apostles are panic-stricken by the way their boat is being tossed about in the storm and go to wake Jesus. Astonished, he turns to them and asks: ‘Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?’ (Matthew 8:26). Then, with one gesture, he calms the waves.

Then why be afraid of my own weaknesses? It is a fact that they exist; but for a long time I have refused to look them in the face. ... Moreover, if I wished to forget them, the Father would soon bring

them back to my attention. He would permit some fault or other in the face of which I would be unable to deny that I am a sinner. He would allow my health to play tricks on me, so that I would admit defeat and deliver myself defenseless to the love of the Father.

...

What is new is that in the future these weaknesses, instead of representing a danger, give me the opportunity to make contact with God. For this reason I must gradually allow myself to become at ease with them, no longer considering them as a disturbing side of my personality, but as something...accepted by the Father; not as some hopeless inevitability but as a basic presupposition for the gift to me of divine life. When I suddenly find myself faced with a previously unknown weakness, my first reflex in the future will not be to panic but to ask myself where the Father may be hidden in it.

We cannot avoid asking ourselves a question: is this transformation of a weakness which seems to be nothing but defeat into a victory of love a sort of second thought on God's part, an alchemy whereby he changes evil into good or, on the contrary, are we not in the presence of a fundamental dimension of the divine order?

One could say a great deal about this. Let us be satisfied with simply stating that, even in the natural order, all true love is a victory of weakness. Love does not consist in dominating, possessing or imposing one's will on someone. Rather love is to welcome without defenses the other as he or she comes to meet me. In return, one is sure of being welcomed unreservedly by the other without being judged or condemned, and without invidious comparisons. There are no contests of strength between two people who love each other. There is a kind of mutual understanding from within which a reciprocal trust emerges.

Such an experience, even if inevitably imperfect, is already a very compelling one. Yet it is but a reflection of a divine reality. Once we really begin to believe in the infinite tenderness of the Father, we are, as it were, obliged to descend ever more fully and joyfully into a realm in which we neither possess...nor control anything.

Thus, almost without being aware of it, we enter into communion with the divine life. The relation between Father and Son in the

Spirit is, at a level completely beyond our comprehension, a perfect embodiment of weakness transformed into communion.

In a way closer to ourselves, this intimate tenderness of the thrice-holy God is revealed in the relationship between the incarnate Son and his Father. We cannot help but be struck by the serenity and sense of infinite security with which Jesus quietly proclaims that he has nothing of his own, and that he can do nothing but what he sees the Father doing. What man would accept such powerlessness? Nevertheless, this is the path we must follow if we wish to live in the depths of our heart as God has made it, and as he transfigures it through the death and Resurrection of his Son.

Mary points us in the same direction. The Magnificat is at once a song of triumph and a recognition of total powerlessness. The two go hand in hand. From the beginning, she realized and accepted her utter weakness; thus does she find herself in a state of readiness to receive the Son which the Father gives her. She becomes the Mother of God because she is the closest to the poverty of God. (“The Prayer of the Heart,” in *The Wound of Love: A Carthusian Miscellany*, 85-87.)

The poverty of God...yes, the life of the Trinity is a life of complete vulnerability, in which each Person is “naked” before the others in an attitude of radical receptivity and unconditional trust. This is the “divine weakness” that does not force, impose, or manifest any kind of violence, but is rather the pure tenderness of loving receptivity and reciprocal gift, which flowers eternally in the breathtaking intimacy shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in their single life of love.

And such divine poverty and weakness, such loving vulnerability, comes to meet me in my own places of weakness and vulnerability. When I no longer deny or flee from them, but through them open myself to the loving gift and touch of God, I find myself drawn into the very openness and intimacy of the divine life.

This does not mean, however, that I need always to be focusing on my wounds and struggles, preoccupied with my own healing and transformation. Rather, as my trust in God’s immense Love deepens—through an ever-renewed encounter with him—I am able to simply entrust myself wholly into his care without complex struggles or numerous

questions. Rather I can simply find rest in his sheltering Heart, letting my weakness be held and cradled by his Mercy, my littleness be sheltered within the immensity of his Love. I can simply look upon him, the Beautiful One, the Loving One, who looks unceasingly upon me. In this simple meeting of looks—vulnerable in trust and love—hearts themselves meet and are united, woven together through the silent communication that occurs in this place.

Yes, here true loving adoration—a spirit of joyful praise and gratitude—blossoms. Indeed, this spirit of adoration is but the spontaneous exclamation of the beloved heart, as it beholds the ineffable beauty and loveliness of God: “How good you are, my God! And how good it is that you are! I rejoice in you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in your endless life of joy and intimacy; and through praise and gratitude I welcome this life as my own.” We see this spontaneous attitude beautifully manifest in Mary of Bethany. After witnessing Christ draw near to the very place of darkness and death—to the tomb of Lazarus—and call forth new life through the power of his Love, she learns to see this Love present and at work in all things. Yes, on the eve of his Passion she comes to him and anoints him with a precious perfume, an expression of her inexpressible love and gratitude, a gift of pure, exuberant adoration. And this gift, this perfume of Mary’s life prodigally poured out in love, is also an act of radical faith, since through it she anticipates the very meaning of Jesus’ ensuing Passion, in which his Love, prodigally pouring itself out, will once again pierce the darkness of suffering and death and bring forth life from the tomb...this time an indestructible Life that is definitively victorious over death, drawing us all into its own victory and carrying us into the fullness of the eternal life of the Trinity.

I said that adoration springs forth from this heart-to-heart encounter and union between God and myself. There is something else, too, which springs forth in this place—or rather simply another dimension of the same reality. In this encounter, the lightheartedness and joy of a little child springs forth in me—as I rediscover the “joy of my youth” (cf. Ps 42:4). This is a true spiritual childlikeness within the enfolding Love of God, which is purer, deeper, and more enduring than anything I knew even in the earliest years of my life. Yes, I find myself cradled in the Heart of Jesus, gentle and humble, and I am sheltered, with him, in the very bosom of the heavenly Father. In this place I can welcome in sim-

plicity and trust each day of my life, allowing God to work freely within me through the activity of his grace. Indeed, I can place myself wholly in his hands and simply let myself be carried, taking each step, moment by moment, as the light of his love marks out the way before me.

At times he will show me a particular, specific path or choice that he desires, and my trust in his goodness and love will enable me to obey, without objections or the need to understand completely. He has asked it, and I know all that he asks and desires is simply for my good and for the good of all of his children. At other times I will walk without any specific, fore-ordained direction, as God, in his tenderness, invites me to spontaneously exercise my freedom as his beloved child. But I will be walking in the Light if only I seek to walk in love—in love for God and for my brothers and sisters, and truly seeking my own true well-being and that of others. Yes, I will never walk in darkness as long as I let his Love enfold and cradle me, and take every step of my life hand in hand with him, as a little child who, loved, sheltered, and cared for, is free to let life unfold in playfulness and joy.

PART III

THE RADIANCE OF LOVE

MEDITATION 14

Dilated by the Touch of Mystery: The True Wealth of Christian Poverty

All forms of relationship as they exist within creation are images which reflect the love of God himself, who has created us in his image and likeness. Whether it is the relationship of parent and child, of husband and wife, of friends, or of siblings, these relationships manifest the mystery of God himself as a Community of Persons. But as beautiful as these created relationships are in themselves, they are not enough to satisfy the human heart, and they powerfully (and at times painfully) point beyond themselves. It is not that they are bad, or even unnecessary, but that they find their place, not in being absolute, but in being sheltered and sustained within the Absolute.

The beauty of relationship within this world points toward the perfect Mystery of the Trinity and to our invitation to share in the life of the Trinity. This is the most central and important invitation for every person: precisely the invitation to surrender to the Trinity who calls us lovingly to himself. This invitation, which is made present in every single moment of our life, has profound implications for the way in which we view our concrete existence and the daily unfolding of our life. It often happens that someone experiencing a “transition” period in life—whether discerning a vocation, or an important decision, or experiencing the apparent failure of one’s plans or hopes—begins to feel “suspended” in “no-place.” They feel as if they are stuck between two places—the past and the future—and are tempted to think that the present finds its meaning only in relation to what has come before or in relation to the decision that will follow later.

The fact of the matter is that these times are, rather, moments of profound grace. This is because they are experiences of deep *spiritual poverty*, in which the securities and safeguards on which we ordinarily rely fall away, and we must seek for meaning in something deeper and more enduring. We have a thirst for this enduring stability, for the undying con-

stancy of Love—which is able to shelter, encompass, and hold us at every moment. However, because of the disordered movements within us due to original sin, we tend to seek this security in things that cannot provide it. These things may indeed be good, even very good, but they are still not God. They are not big enough to encompass and hold our hearts, which burst beyond the confines of all things created toward the infinity from which they have come.

This is true even for the most blessed of human relationships. If in times of transition and spiritual poverty we are tempted to grasp to past or future, or to create meaning through our own efforts to achieve something in the present (rather than turning inward to the sustaining Love of God that transcends all external things), the same is true for times of spiritual or temporal “*wealth*.” When we feel that things are going well, that we have been blessed by God, or that relationships are flowering in a beautiful way for us, this is *also* an invitation to fall in love with the One in whom alone our hearts can be at rest. The danger is that we will settle for the immediately accessible, which at the moment may seem satisfying, rather than allowing it to open up before us a yet deeper Mystery.

Indeed, only in openness to this transcendent Mystery can these good things maintain their true meaning and their authentic goodness. This is because they are held within his arms at every moment, and find their meaning only as an expression of his own infinite Love, flowing from and returning to his intimate bosom. If we want these relationships, these blessed experiences to last, then it is necessary to allow them to flower wholly within the sheltering embrace of God. He alone can be the Foundation that endures, the Bridge that can carry all created goodness and beauty across the boundary of death into the fullness of eternity, where it is not dissolved, but rather brought to its radiant perfection.

In a word, *the attitude of a loving and trust-filled spiritual poverty* is the precondition for authentically receiving and possessing anything within this life, whether materially, spiritually, or personally. True *wealth* consists precisely in this spiritual poverty: this radical openness to receive and to give, enfolded within the all-encompassing Love of God himself. When the human heart *grasps*, it automatically reduces reality to its own size; but when it *opens itself to receive*, it allows itself to be ex-

panded and dilated through contact with the Mystery that approaches it in every thing and beyond every thing.

Then there blossoms a beautiful harmony in our experience: between God's presence in every created reality and relationship, and the way that these realities find their unique meaning sheltered within his loving and affirming embrace, and the way that our hearts dilate within and beyond all of this toward the immensity of the One who both transcends and pervades all things, enveloping us within the intimacy of his Divine Embrace.

However, we can often be like the Samaritan woman who comes to the well at noonday, in the blazing heat, to draw the water that will never quench our thirst. We are perhaps wounded by past experiences of rejection or misunderstanding, and we are afraid to open ourselves vulnerably to another. Therefore we seek to relate to others, and to the world as a whole, as something that is within our control. It is "safer" this way. But our hearts bear within themselves the image of the Infinite! Therefore we cannot be content with anything that is within our control, under our possession...for our longing is precisely to be in the possession of another, to be sheltered, held, and protected within their embrace.

"You have forsaken me, the Fountain of living waters, and have hewed out cisterns for yourselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water," as God says through Jeremiah the prophet (cf. Jer 2:13). But our restless thirst, which impels us to seek for water in so many wells, is itself a great promise of the Water that can satisfy. Do not all of our other desires correspond to objects which fulfill them? The desire for food is itself a sign that *real* food exists to nourish us; our physical thirst is a sign that *real* drink exists to quench us; the desire for human intimacy is a sign that our hearts were made for mutual love and communion with other human persons. But even if we have all of these things, there remains within us an unsatisfied desire. Indeed, the more profoundly we experience beauty and goodness in the world, often the more keenly we feel its inadequacy to truly bring rest to our hearts.

What, then, can satisfy this mysterious desire, this holy restlessness deep within us? It is nothing external—no job, no achievements, no comfort or worldly security, nor even a deep and enduring human love. All beauty within our world is but a "sacrament" that unveils something of the countenance of God, a word of love addressed to us and inviting

us deeper. We can imagine that, within every created thing, there is a kind of “magnetism” that seeks to draw our hearts to the One who yearns to unite us to himself. The famous poet Gerard Manley Hopkins described this mystery as “inscape.” This is a kind of “bounded infinity” at the heart of every created reality, through which it reveals that it has *come from* the creative hand of God, *remains* rooted in him, and *points back* to him.

When we seek created things merely in their own right, separated from the ravishing beauty of the One who made them and holds them in existence, our eyes are blind to the profound and authentic meaning that they bear within them. Only when we are willing to go *beyond* them, toward God who both transcends them and also sustains them, can we approach them in the fullness of truth and love, discerning in them the radiance of God’s own light and presence. But how beautiful is this invitation! It means that God has so fashioned us that we cannot just remain on the surface of reality, but have been made to plunge into its depth through a loving and contemplative gaze. Yes, we have been made to gaze, without ceasing, upon the face of the One who is himself ineffable Beauty, complete Goodness, fullness of Truth, and perfect Love! He is present in all things, and indeed in all the circumstances of our lives, and yet these things, revealing him, also remain a kind of “veil” through which he invites us to pass in faith, hope, and love...so as to plunge into his own unspeakable Mystery.

It is prayer which gives access to this Mystery, or rather which allows this Mystery to begin to touch us and unveil itself to us. Prayer is first of all the willingness to allow oneself to be addressed by God, to be approached by him. Is this not, indeed, the reason that it is difficult for so many persons? To allow Another to take the initiative, to draw near to me, gazing upon me and addressing a word that I cannot foresee or control...this is a profoundly vulnerable experience. But as Martin Buber wrote: “God cannot be known as ‘*He*,’ but only as ‘*You*.” This means that God cannot be grasped as a Proposition or a Theory, nor even in the “Third Person,” but can only be truly known in *dialogue*...in loving encounter, and the living relationship that flows from this. As Pope Benedict has so beautifully said:

“God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God

abides in him” (1 Jn 4:16). These words from the First Letter of John express with remarkable clarity the heart of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny. In the same verse, Saint John also offers a kind of summary of the Christian life: “We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us.” *We have come to believe in God’s love*: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. (*Deus Caritas Est*, 1)

Saint John Paul II said something very similar. Understanding that, as the beloved disciple wrote, “God is Love,” the Pope wrote:

Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it. ... The man who wishes to understand himself thoroughly—and not just in accordance with immediate, partial, often superficial, and even illusory standards and measures of his being—he must with his unrest, uncertainty and even his weakness and sinfulness, with his life and death, draw near to Christ. He must, so to speak, enter into him with all his own self, he must “appropriate” and assimilate the whole of the reality of the Incarnation and Redemption in order to find himself. If this profound process takes place within him, he then bears fruit not only of adoration of God but also of deep wonder at himself. How precious must man be in the eyes of the Creator, if he “gained so great a Redeemer”, and if God “gave his only Son” in order that man “should not perish but have eternal life”. (*Redemptor Hominis*, 11)

This is what God desires for us...to approach us in our thirst for happiness, in our yearning to know who we truly are, in our inmost longing for love and intimacy, and to unveil to us his own even more ardent thirst for us, his tender and constant love for us. This is true wealth, and the consolation of true poverty! Letting myself be enfolded in the Mystery of the One who is perfect Love! When my thirst encounters God’s

thirst for me—his profound love for me and his delight in who I am—then true faith awakens and comes to life in my heart. It is almost as if I no longer “believe” in God as a mere choice or religious assent, but rather *I allow him to breathe into me the certainty of his existence and his love.*

This certainty in being known and loved by God, and the corresponding experience of the Beauty of God himself which his loves reveals to me...this becomes the foundation of my whole existence, and the light in which I see and experience all things. My life then becomes a life of prayer, for I begin to gain the confidence to let myself be vulnerable before God, who unceasingly comes to me in his love. In every moment I am open to welcome him and to surrender myself into his embrace. I welcome his mysterious and all-pervading presence; I abandon myself into the arms of the One who cradles me within himself; I recognize that the whole of creation is contained within this same embrace, and I can therefore see, receive, and understand all things more deeply and more truly than I ever have before.

MEDITATION 15

Interior Openness:

“Indifference” as the Simple Trust of a Child

A statement is frequently made that bears a lot of truth, but also, understood a certain way, is a little inaccurate. It is often said that “once you discover your deepest desires, you will know God’s will for you.” It is implied that God’s will is identical with our deepest desires, and if only we can “tap into” them, we will know precisely what God wants for us. The fundamental truth here is that God has given us our authentic desires—our longing for love, for intimacy, for happiness, for well-being, for the gift of ourselves and the reception of the gift of others—and that he yearns to fulfill these desires in his paternal care for us.

However, I have encounters again and again in which, as people get in touch with the inner longing of their hearts, they say something like: “my desires are universal, and they don’t seem to point to any particular vocation or decision.” This reveals that our desires inherently transcend any particular choice or limited path in this world, that they are, as it were, boundless, and cannot rest in anything finite or particular (even in the concrete expressions of God’s will for us in this life).

Therefore, this “transcendence” of my desires over any single vocation or state of life, over any concrete decision, action, or experience, is but a sign that I have been created by God to be *more* than a mere vocation, *more* than a mere “mission.” I am deeper, deeper than all the external circumstances of my life, deeper even than my human relationships... rooted in the very eternity of God, who cradles my inmost being in his embrace. His deepest desire for me, the very reason he made me, is simply love and intimacy: *profound interpersonal communion sought and experienced for its own sake...which goes deeper than all external expressions while also enfolding them and being manifest within them.*

Indeed, it is precisely this realization of the transcendent call to intimacy, the all-enveloping reality of Love-for-its-own-sake, which opens the way to truly receiving the call to my particular vocation or to a par-

ticular decision in my life. This is because it allows my heart to relax into what St. Ignatius of Loyola calls “indifference,” but which is perhaps better called “interior openness” or “freedom of heart.” How does it do this? Because once I realize that no created thing—and not even a particular ministry or vocation received in obedience to God—can fulfill my desires, I am able to cease grasping and clinging for such things. I am able to let go and open myself, in simple trust, to whatever God may wish to give to me. All of this is secondary to his simply loving presence, which will never leave me, and to his Love which unceasingly cradles me within itself. My identity does not lie in any of these things, but only in the innermost truth of my being, bathed in the Father’s gaze and in intimate relationship with him.

Truly, only when I know myself to be intimately and enduringly loved by God can I recognize that every moment of my life is but an expression of his fatherly care for me. I come to trust, even in times of darkness and suffering, that “all things work together for good” (Rom 8:24) for me and for all of my brothers and sisters, through the immensity of God’s ever-present Love. Then I can open my heart—without fear of being disappointed, without fear of receiving from him something that hurts me—and welcome anything and everything as an expression of his Love. Indeed, in all, through all, and beyond all, I simply seek to welcome his Love itself, ever communicating itself to me. And, through the power of this Love, I can abandon myself lovingly into God’s hands in return.

This is indeed the interior movement revealed in the prayer of St. Ignatius, the *Suscipe*:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,
my memory, my understanding,
and my entire will,
All I have and call my own.
You have given all to me.
To you, Lord, I return it.
Everything is yours; do with it what you will.
Give me only your love and your grace,

that is enough for me.ⁱ

My whole life, in its every concrete expression, is cradled within the primary, all-enveloping relationship of intimate love that God has established with me. Because of this, my heart can remain united to him in the simplicity and trust of a little child, receiving from him all that he gives, all that he asks, and giving myself lovingly and generously in return. This is the childlike simplicity that awakens when—and only when—I know myself to be infinitely and unceasingly loved by the Father and cradled at every moment within the arms of his Love. Trust awakens in my heart through his touch, a trust in which I become confident that his intentions for me are only love, and nothing but love—that everything he does and wills is simply the expression of his one desire: to unite me intimately to himself, and in himself, to my brothers and sisters, now and forever.

This allows the desire to grow within me, not for a particular path, but above all simply to receive ever more deeply the pure love that the Father gives beyond all things and in all things, and to allow it to transform my life. Only within this all-enfolding truth of childlike openness—this deep spiritual nakedness before God which is born of the joyful confidence that his Love is enough—only within this can the reality of

i. There is another prayer, perhaps even more beautiful, which expresses the same spiritual attitude, written by Charles de Foucauld, that ardent hermit of the Sahara. Notice the word with which the prayer begins and ends. That is the key to understanding it:

Father,
I abandon myself into your hands;
do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you:
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me,
and in all your creatures —
I wish no more than this, O Lord.
Into your hands I commend my soul:
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.

vocation freely unfold. When I desire *him*, then I am free also to welcome all that comes from him, as an expression of his awesome love and of his tender, constant, and intimate providence. Then, indeed, I can hear his call, not as arising from within my own personal desires, which are often muddled and confused—but as a gift coming from the outside which directs and harmonizes my desires into a unity.

This harmony is first of all simply the unity created by receiving God's Love and responding to his invitation to surrender myself into his welcoming embrace—the unity of childlike and spousal intimacy with him. It is also a unity that harmonizes all of my desires and hopes along the path of love toward the Beloved who invites me, and who I know can alone satisfy the thirst of my heart, and to whom I want to give myself entirely in return. Third, it is a unity of living, no longer according to the fragmenting desires, wishes, and fears of my superficial “self,” but according to the inner truth of my being before God and before others. This is a unity which flowers in the capacity to live at every moment in love: in an ardent love for God and for my brothers and sisters, whom I yearn to serve and to help draw closer to the bosom of the Trinity.

Finally—and flowing from and returning to these deeper, more encompassing movements—this is a unity of living according to the particular contours of the unique path that God lays before me in this world. It is not in this that I find my identity or my security; rather, this springs unceasingly from that inmost place of God's Love, for me and for each one of his children, in which he gently cradles the world. Springing from this place as from a never-ending wellspring, the unity and harmony of love are expressed in the concrete unfolding of my life—in which I receive God's gift, live in communion with him and with others, and offer my life as a gift back to God and to my brothers and sisters.

In a word, the harmony of my life—flowing unceasingly from the Love of God, cradled always in this Love, and surging back into this Love once again—unfolds entirely within the all-enfolding harmony and peace of knowing myself to be his precious and beloved child, held always in his loving arms which cradle the entire world.

MEDITATION 16

Receiving the Gift of Love: The True Freedom of Christian Obedience

The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing, for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise. For *the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing.* (John 5:19-20)

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. ... You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but *I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.* (John 15:9-11, 14-15)

Jesus has come into the world to reveal the face of the Father, to make known to us his "form": his glory, his beauty, his presence, and his love. And Jesus can do this precisely because, as John has said, he is "the only-begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father" (1:18). All that Jesus is and does in this world is but an expression of his eternal repose in the bosom of his Father; it is the radiation of the eternal intimacy of the Trinity's innermost life of love.

We can at first be surprised, in the quotes above, at the way in which Jesus expresses this intimate relationship—for he does so in a series of paradoxes. From our earthly, sinful perspective, he seems to be talking about two realities that are in opposition. Yet he does so in the confidence that they are really two aspects of the same reality, if not identical. Put simply, this is the paradox of which Jesus speaks: his complete *dependency* upon the Father is precisely the source of his *sovereign freedom*.

Let us take the words I have just quoted. In these words Jesus grants us an insight into the deepest origin and root from which his own obedience springs, and in this way expresses the very core of his loving relationship with the Father. The obedience of Jesus throughout his earthly life is nothing but an expression *in time* of the mystery that he lives with the Father *in eternity*. And what is this eternal mystery? *It is nothing but the everlasting communion of the Father and the Son, the single life of love that they share in an unspeakably profound intimacy.* And this intimacy is possible because the Son welcomes, completely and unreservedly, the gift of love that comes to him from the Father and surrenders himself entirely to the Father in return, in gratitude, joy, and love.

These words of Jesus, therefore, operate on two levels: on the level of time and on the level of eternity. They operate on the level of *obedience* and on the level of his *pure acceptance of the Father's gift* which is the root and origin of obedience while itself transcending it. In a word, in the heart of eternity, as Jesus welcomes the gift of the Father, he is not receiving a "task" or a "mission," but rather simply welcoming the very truth of *his own personal identity as beloved Son, and the joy of everlasting intimacy with the Father.* He receives the gift of himself as an outpouring of the Father's own immense generosity and gives himself wholly to the Father in return. The most primal act of "obedience," therefore, is simply to welcome the gift of one's existence cradled within the immense love of the Father. This is really the "obedience-before-obedience": the act of grateful acceptance of the gift of love and communion which gives all concrete obedience its interior form and meaning.

Further, within this act of receiving himself, the Son also simultaneously welcomes *the whole mystery of the Father*, making his innermost being a home to welcome his Beloved. And the Father, who unveils himself before the Son in the total gift of himself—"the Father shows the Son everything"—ravishes the being of the Son with his ineffable Beauty, pouring forth its radiance into the receptivity of the Son's Heart. Delighted by this Beauty of his Father and drawn to it, the Son abandons himself entirely to the Father in return, so as to pass over into the depths of his loving and welcoming embrace. The Father and the Son are continually welcoming one another in complete openness and burning love, and their welcoming is simultaneously the total gift of self to the other. Because of the totality of this mutual self-giving, the Father and the Son

are intimately united, and not only united, but *they dwell within one another*, inhabiting one another in perfect security and mutual belonging.

We can say, then, that the relationship of the Father and the Son is one of mutual *attraction* through the impulse of love that draws each of them toward one another. They *desire* one another, and this desire is a profound and eternal response to the Glory, the Beauty, that they behold shining in the countenance of the One whom they love. In a word, they are profoundly responsive to the Beauty that they behold in one another, and their receptivity to this Beauty is what brings forth their complete mutual self-donation to each other. Beauty encounters Beauty, and in Beauty these two Beautiful Ones are united in a single Beauty of the intimacy that they share—that is, in the Beauty of the Holy Spirit who is the beautiful Kiss or Embrace of their everlasting union.

What does this imply for the existence of the Son when he becomes a man among us and shares our life? It means that his whole existence is cradled within the enfolding Love of the Father and is responsive at every moment to the Beauty of the One from whom he receives his whole being at every moment. The “food” of Christ is to “do the will of the One who sent him” (4:34), but this very “doing,” before being an external activity, is simply the Son’s unceasing acceptance of the love of his heavenly Father. It is his act of allowing his Heart to be a home, a place of repose for his loving Father, and also his act of abandoning himself into the home of the Father’s Heart, abiding in him in the joy, playfulness, and rest of all true love and intimacy. The deepest reality of Jesus’ existence is his unceasing *repose* within his Father’s all-enfolding embrace, in which he dwells in the authentic truth of his being as the beloved Son. Indeed, this deepest reality is the *mutual intimacy* that is shared by the Father and the Son, in which, belonging totally to one another, they share a single life of love, a single vision, a single desire, and a single activity. From this place of his abiding intimacy with the Father, all of Jesus’ thoughts, words, and actions spring, and to here they return. Indeed, they never depart from this place, but simply radiate ceaselessly from this ineffably fruitful Center.

For us too, who have been created and called to be “children in the Son,” our own life of obedience to the Father is but an expression of the

immensity of his love for us, and of our trusting acceptance of his embrace which cradles our whole life and every moment of our existence within itself. For us too, the Father's only, all-enfolding desire is simply *to be in intimacy with us*, to hold us in the inmost depths of his paternal embrace and to find a welcoming-space in our own hearts. Whatever else there is in our life finds its meaning only here, flowing from and returning to this place of intimate love and personal unity.

Every "task" that we welcome from the Father is itself contained within this prior gift of his love and his desire for our good, an echo of his gentle touch in the depths of our being. Further, it is precisely our certainty in his enduring love, the awareness of his sheltering presence, that liberates us to heed his invitation and to live in confident and persevering surrender to his call. If we were to reduce our relationship with God to mere obedience, then we would ultimately reduce ourselves to slaves—we who are his beloved children and friends. We would be missing out on the authentic meaning of the Father's desire and the true nature of his call. We would be viewing him as a "Master" when he wants to be Father and Lover. However, if we see obedience within the prior and enduring context of loving and trust-filled relationship between Father and child, between Bridegroom and bride, then its true beauty begins to shine. Indeed, here alone obedience becomes truly radiant, truly free, truly joyful, because here it is totally loving and pervaded with the joy, the trust, and the freedom of love.

This love-filled obedience is beautiful in two senses. First, because the beloved child knows without a doubt that anything the Father asks cannot but be an expression of his love and of his immense desire for the good of his son or daughter. Second, because the child yearns to embrace the will of the Father, not out of fear or a sense of necessity, nor to make up for a sense of inadequacy and insecurity, nor to "prove oneself," but simply because the child loves the Father and wants to cooperate with his desires and plans in the fullest way. Certainly here the obedience of a child far transcends anything that can be required of a slave, because it is founded on love and the total gift of self that love alone can awaken. And precisely for this reason this kind of obedience is immensely more free than any external obligation or compulsion, with the freedom of authentic and devoted intimacy.

We saw that obedience flows from the already established relation-

ship of intimacy between us and God, a relationship that comes as a pure gift of divine grace, enfolding and cradling our life at every moment. To be obedient, in the last analysis, is simply to allow one's life to be touched by this gift and irradiated by its light. It is to open oneself to hear and to welcome—with the docility of a little child, with the receptivity of a lover, with the malleability of a heart softened by love and burning desire—the awesome word and touch of the Beloved.

Because of this, obedience is also a pathway into deeper intimacy: it is the simple movement by which we place our entire life into the hands of our loving Father, allowing him to care for us as he most deeply desires to do. To entrust myself totally into the hands of Another may be a frightening act, because I am afraid of how my surrender will be received. Will I be accepted, loved, sheltered, protected? Further, to entrust myself totally to Another is also to open myself to receive, unconditionally and completely, whatever comes to me from the Beloved. But what if I am asked something painful, difficult, or even destructive? We see how deep the roots of sin and fear go, stretching their tendrils into our hearts! We are tempted to think that we are safer in our own hands than in the hands of our loving Father, who unceasingly cradles the entire world within the embrace of his tender Love, and who gazes upon us with an unspeakable love, desire, and delight!

To open myself to the Father in obedience is not a matter of accepting some burdensome task, some external yoke placed on my shoulders from without. No, it is rather a matter of opening my heart to the Light that alone can illumine, to the gentle arms of Love that hold me so tenderly throughout my life, sheltering and sustaining me. *To open myself to obedience is to let myself be loved by God.* And when I welcome this love, it fills my whole being and existence with his immense joy and consolation, with the gladness of the Trinity's own life which the world cannot contain, but which comes to rest within my heart. I hold my Beloved deep within the recesses of my most intimate being, allowing his heartbeat to well up within me and to spill over into my entire existence, this living water surging gently at every moment of my life. Yes, through the depths of the intimacy that he has established with me through our mutual surrender, he lives his own life of love within me. He perpetuates in me his loving activity...an activity which is identical with his Eternal Rest. He spreads within and through me, like a fragrance of love or a

harmony of beauty, his provident love and care for all of his precious children...a care which is but an expression of his Divine Playfulness, delighting immensely in me and in each person, whom he has created for himself.

MEDITATION 17

The Risk of Love:

How Obedience Opens the Way to Deeper Intimacy

In the previous reflection, we saw that Jesus' complete dependence upon his Father is the very source of his complete freedom, because all of his thoughts and activity spring from his radical receptivity to the gift of the Father's love—a never-ending wellspring of truth and intimacy, of fullness of life and being. This constant reception of his very being from the Father is what allows him to give himself entirely in love, not only back to the Father, but to each one of us. As he says in the Gospel of John chapter 10:

I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd. Therefore, because the Father loves me, I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father. (v. 14-18)

In these words Jesus speaks of the “power” that he has to lay down his life and to take it up again. In other words, his life is entirely in his hands—he “has life in himself” as he says in chapter 5 (v. 26)—but it is completely in his hands only because he unceasingly receives it as a gift from the hands of his Father. His very receptivity to the Father's undying gift is the very source of his being, his power, and his authority: “I can do nothing on my own authority; as I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 5:30). How can we reconcile this fact that Jesus has no authority of his own, and yet he has “all authority in heaven and on earth?” (Mt 28:18). The answer lies in the truth of his *sonship*, in the innermost

mystery of his being and identity, which is *loving communion with the Father*. Jesus lives and acts always from the place of his sonship, his intimate filial relationship with his Father—and therefore his whole existence expresses his *divinity*.

The same word that Jesus uses to refer to his “power” to lay down his life and to take it up again is identical with the word “authority.” In Greek the word *exousia* means both *power* and *authority*. What are the linguistic roots of this word? *Ex* means “out of” or “from,” and *ousia* means “being” or “substance.” This means that true power and authority is not, as many people tend to think, the ability to impose one’s will or force on another; rather, it means *the ability to pour forth the fullness of one’s being in love*. Because Jesus receives the fullness of the Father’s Being poured out in love, and remains always in communion with this gift, he in turn is able to pour out his Being for the life of the world...in order to take us up in himself and introduce us into the intimacy that he shares with his Father.

There is another Greek word that has the term *ousia* at its root. It is a tremendously important word in the development of Christian theology, and was formulated in order to safeguard the true divinity of Jesus Christ. It is found in the Nicene Creed:

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
consubstantial (*homo-ousios*) with the Father.

The word *homo-ousios* means “of the same substance” or “of the same being.” Its implication is that, because Jesus receives the whole gift of the Being of the Father, he is truly one Being with him, one God, equal with the Father in the unity of the Trinity’s inner life of love. His “one-in-being” with the Father, therefore, allows all of his acts and words, his entire human existence, to bear the divine authority (*ex-ousia*). His whole existence is but an irradiation of the Divine Light, the Glory pouring forth from the fullness of the Divine Being made incarnate in his very flesh.

This reality of intimacy with the Father, which applies fully to Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, is also realized in the life of each one of us, who are adopted children who share, through grace, in the mystery of the only Son. Obedience is but our response to this *exousia* of Christ and of the Father—that is, our response to the radiant Gaze of Love that touches and illumines us, awakening within us our deep personal truth and our authentic desires, and shines upon us the light of Love that invites us to surrender ourselves to the One who invites us into intimacy with himself.

Therefore, our life, unfolding in trust-filled obedience, is but the expression of the intimate relationship that God our loving Father establishes with us in Christ. It is our acceptance of the gift of his love in every moment of our life, our malleability to his gentle and transforming touch, and our abandonment of ourselves into his provident care. In this light we can say that obedience is simply a way of letting the innermost truth of our being as it exists before God—our authentic identity as his beloved child, illumined by the light of his loving gaze—spread out from within to irradiate our entire existence. In this sense obedience is but our fidelity to the gift of childhood that has been bestowed upon us by God, the radiant beauty of our adoption into the family of the Trinity.

Further, we can say that obedience is not only the *expression* of our filial intimacy with God, but also a movement in our *transformation* according to the truth of this intimacy—a path into ever deepening intimacy with the One who loves us and calls us into communion with himself. How can obedience be both an expression of this intimacy and yet also a path deeper into it? It is really quite simple: *we do not yet experience and live to the full the awesome gift that has already been given to us by God.*

I am his precious and beloved child...here and now in the unique fullness of this present moment. When God gazes upon me, he sees and rejoices in the fullness of my identity, my dignity, and my unrepeatable beauty before him. Indeed, his very gaze of love *constitutes* me as the unique person that I am. Yet this gift, ever alive in the inner sanctuary of my being where I am in ceaseless relationship with God, ever cradled in the arms of his Love, is so often suffocated by the struggles, brokenness, and confusion of the “outer sphere” of my being. It is as if the Holy of

Holies has been preserved, bearing God's sacred Presence, but the radiance of its awesome light does not shine out freely through all the halls and rooms of the temple.

This, indeed, is the result of sin: that rather than abiding in the "center" of my being in trusting relationship with God, I have turned away from him and tried to grasp for life and control by myself, resulting in finding myself "exiled" to the periphery of my being. I find myself trapped on the surface, among so many anxieties and cares, so many temptations and fears, so many desires that seek for fulfillment in unhealthy ways which can never satisfy my deepest thirst. Indeed, I can even find myself so fractured and wounded that I am not even aware of this sanctuary of beauty present in the center of my being. Even if perhaps I glimpse it through the loving gaze of another, I soon forget it, or I struggle to believe in it. All of my brokenness, my sins, my selfishness... this is all so much closer to my experience, and so I take it to be the "real truth" about who I am, whereas the truth of my childhood and my beauty in his eyes can seem so elusive.

But the loving gaze of God goes deeper, this gaze of his immense and ardent desire for me...piercing through the darkness of my shame, my fear, my confusion...and reopening me to the healing light of love. Trust and desire begin to be set free within me, and I yearn to love the One who has loved me; I thirst for him who thirsts for me; I long for intimacy with the One who longs for intimacy with me. Yes, his touch in the core of my being draws me from my fragmentation into unity, and the veil is pulled back from the inner sanctuary where he dwells...a glimpse—for a moment, an instant—and my life is forever changed.

There is a powerful scene in the Gospel of Matthew that serves as an icon of this reality of obedient surrender, a surrender filled with trust and desire: the moment when Peter walks on the windswept waves toward Jesus, who approaches in the darkness of the night, saying, "It is I; do not be afraid."

Then he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was many furlongs distant from the land, beaten by the waves; for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the

night he came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear. But immediately he spoke to them, saying, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (Matthew 14:22-33)

In this scene we see vividly how God invites us into deeper intimacy with himself precisely by drawing us out beyond our doubt and hesitation, beyond our shame, beyond the lies and fears of our woundedness... beyond whatever holds us back from abandoning ourselves entirely into his loving arms. He asks us to do something which to us seems impossible, something that makes sense only on the foundation of a *profound trust*.

He asks us, in a word, to place our trust entirely in him, surrendering our very weakness and frailty, our very fear and doubt, our very sorrow and anguish, into his care. "It is I; do not be afraid," he calls out to us from the stormy landscape of our life. "If it is you, Lord," we respond, "then bid me to come to you...to go out beyond myself, trusting entirely and solely in your word and your invitation, and relying only upon your sustaining grace and your all-enveloping Love."

This movement *beyond* myself toward God in radical trust is indeed the paradoxical key to *returning* into my own authentic truth from which I have been exiled. This is because only in him, in his cradling arms, do I know myself as I am. Only in him do I find the Home from which I feel like I have been lost for so long: the home which is the Heart of Jesus Christ, open to receive me. The home which is indeed of the bosom of the Father himself, who proclaims with joy: "This child was lost, and now is found, was dead, and has come to life again."

But how can I do this, how can I find the courage and confidence to take this risk, this profound risk of love...by stepping out onto the crashing waves with no support but his Love? Only because he has *already*

united himself to me, only because his Love indeed *does constantly* support me. This Love is the very foundation of my being, the very Mystery alive in my innermost depths. Yes, his presence *within* me responds to his presence *beyond* me, and I find myself cradled between these two forms of grace: the grace within and the grace without.

If I let myself be held by the grace that already burns inside of me through God's gift, if I welcome the gift of my childlike dependence upon him by stepping out in complete trust and obedience, then I allow him to truly show himself to be my loving Father. By this trust that I place in him, this risk and vulnerability of love through which I surrender my heart and life to him, I open the space in which he can truly prove to me, more deeply than he ever has before, how good a Father he is.

Yes, this is how intimacy overflows in authentic obedience—the radical act of trusting surrender by which I place my life entirely in God's hands and allow him to lead me in his mysterious providence. And this is how obedience allows intimacy to deepen and mature—for this very act of trusting surrender gives God the space and the permission to do beautiful things within me and my life, drawing me into his own healing Fire of Love, where he enfolds me, touches me, heals me, and transforms me. Through this act of faith, stepping out into complete reliance on my Beloved, I find my very weakness enfolded in the Strength of God, I find my very littleness cradled in the Immensity of his Love, I find my very fears sheltered and held in his consoling embrace, I find my desires touched and irradiated by his even more ardent desire for me.

Through this encounter—an encounter of unspeakable depth and power—God is able to draw me from my exile into the truth of intimacy with himself, communicating all that he is to all that I am, the whole of his Being to the whole of my being. And he is able to welcome me completely into the innermost depths of his own Heart, since now I have truly given myself to him. I have abandoned my life into his hands by the very power of the grace already at work within me. It is thus, from intimacy to intimacy, that the union of my being with the Being of God fully flowers, radiant in beauty and overflowing in joy. I taste, already in this life, the communion for which I have been created and which will be known fully in the consummation of eternity.

Through responding to his loving invitation—“Come”—through

entrusting my life to him on the raging waves of this world, through letting him be my Father, through letting him care for me as my God...I allow him to bring forth, in the whole of my existence, the awesome truth that has always been present within me through his loving gaze, this truth of who I am as his precious and beloved child.

Indeed, entering fully into my life, he spontaneously spreads the fragrance of his love and peace through me to others. Grasping my hand within his own, he enters anew into the rocking boat of his Church and, through his presence, calms the storms that torment her. When I live according to this truth of who I am as his beloved child—according to this truth of his awesome Fatherhood, of his infinite Love and Tenderness—then the openness of my own heart serves to carve out a space in the hearts of others in which they too can welcome this awesome Love of God. Yes, the power of his loving presence, touching me so deeply in the innermost recesses of my heart—and enabling me to surrender myself wholly to his love—brings the peace that overcomes all fear, the unity that overcomes all division, the truth that illumines all error, and the life that is never ending bliss and fullness of joy.

MEDITATION 18

Irradiated by the Light of His Eyes: The Beauty of Christian Chastity

The human heart was created for intimacy, and for intimacy it thirsts. This is the truth on which Christian chastity is founded—or rather, chastity is but the flowering of this desire for intimacy in authentic truth and love.

We have looked in the previous reflections at the realities of poverty and obedience, and now we turn our gaze to chastity, which in union with the other two already spoken of comprises the “threefold” form of all authentic love. In other words, love, in the beauty of its full flowering, is always poor, obedient, and chaste. All of these three elements of love are indeed simply expressions of a single mystery: *the openness of the heart to receive and to give, in a vulnerability that allows relationships to blossom in profound intimacy*. In turn, this intimacy is spontaneously fruitful, and brings forth goodness, truth, and beauty more deeply into the world. Further, this love is, as we have seen, but the expression, the radiation of the truth of our belovedness before God, of our childlike union with him in the Heart of his Son Jesus Christ.

We have seen how knowing oneself to be a *beloved son or daughter* allows one to be joyfully poor—utterly dependent in radical trust on the loving care of the Father, and placing all our treasure in him. It also allows one to be obedient—receptive at every moment to the awesome gift that ever flows from his hands and trustingly surrendered to his guidance. But poverty and obedience also bear a *spousal* element, in that they express the loving dilation of our hearts ever more ardently toward the divine Beloved, in whom alone we can find rest. This spousal element of our relationship with God—and in him with others (whether in the normal expression of marital love or in the virginal expression of radical communion within the Heart of Christ)—is where the truth of chastity most vividly reveals its meaning.

When I allow myself to be looked upon by God, when my gaze

meets his own loving gaze upon me, a new world opens up to me. Beforehand, I saw all things from within the narrowness of my own perspective, shifting between the glimmers of light and the shadows of darkness. I pursued the truth, I sought goodness, I tried to open myself to beauty, but it was like these realities remained *on the outside*, beyond my grasp. They drew me, they invited me, for in them I glimpsed something of the love of my Creator. But it was always *I* who was looking, *I* who was seeking. However, when I encounter the loving gaze of God, there is a radical “paradigm shift.” The whole of reality that enfolds me is not merely beautiful for me—a veil through which I seek to gaze upon God—but *a veil through which God approaches me and gazes upon me in his love*. I can thus say with the bride in the Song of Songs: “The voice of my beloved! Behold, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. ... Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice” (Sg 2:8-9).

He has made creation to be a “space” in and through which he approaches me, drawing near to me to invite me into intimate relationship with himself. There he stands, gazing in through the “lattice” of every created reality, the radiance cast from his eyes pouring forth into my soul. When I open myself to this loving gaze, when I let myself be seen, then this light of love truly illumines me in the deepest recesses of my being. I know myself to be infinitely, constantly, uniquely, and tenderly loved...and within the touch of this love my inner being is awakened and brought to life. Yes, my heart is wounded with longing for the One whose glance has ravished me, and I am opened to hear him calling out to me:

Arise, my love, my dove, my fair one,
and come away;
for behold, the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of pruning has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.
The fig tree puts forth its figs,
and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.

Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away.
O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,
in the covert of the cliff,
let me see your face,
let me hear your voice,
for your voice is sweet,
and your face is beautiful. (Sg 2:11-14)

In his love my God calls me forth from the winter of my loneliness; he invites me into the fruitful springtime of love and intimacy. His only request is that I “arise” and “come away,” stepping forth from my defenses, from the barriers that I build up around myself, in order to allow him to “see” me and to “hear” my voice. Yes, this gaze is a source of delight for him, for in looking upon me he truly calls me his love, his fair one. For him my face is uniquely beautiful and my voice is ineffably sweet. How can this be? Because, in gazing, he sees the inner truth of who I am, fashioned by his own loving hands. I bear in myself a mystery, a dignity that is inexpressibly beautiful and profound, and God sees this pouring forth through all that I am, in my voice, my eyes, my body, my existence. For him I am truly his beloved, his “only one,” and no one else compares with me.

Indeed, he yearns not only to be allowed to look upon me and to love me. He also thirsts to receive my own loving gaze in response—to be allowed to gaze deeply into my eyes which gaze into his, the eyes of each pouring forth the mystery of the inner heart to the other. When this occurs, he can cry out further: “You have ravished my heart with a glance of your eyes!” (Sg 4:9). What a God we have, that his love is so ardent, so intimate, so pure! He yearns to enter into a profound nuptial union with me, his tiny little creature—to make his home within my heart, and thus to take me to live with him in the recesses of his own Heart!

From the profound impact of this loving encounter—this meeting of loving looks—the deepest reality of chastity is born within my heart. I can never see myself the same again. My sins, my failures, my brokenness cannot be the last word, because the divine Lover has called me beautiful. Yes, and I can never gaze on any created thing the same way either, for in them I see traces of the beauty of the One who is the precious trea-

sure and sole desire of my heart. Indeed, through them I glimpse his eyes gazing upon me, I feel his tender arms enfolding and sustaining me at every moment. And this touch of intimacy dilates my heart to yearn for an ever deeper intimacy with him—for the definitive encounter and perfect embrace that awaits us at the end of time.

In a word, chastity is born when my own seeing is irradiated by and transformed in the light of God's own loving vision. I begin to see all things bathed in the light of belovedness, in the gentle glow cast from the countenance of the divine Bridegroom. Like the man Bartimaeus who was born blind, I have cast off the cloak of my burdens and fears, and, crying out with longing for health, I have encountered the healing gaze of Love looking upon me. After this encounter I can no longer be the same. From now on I follow in the footsteps of the Beloved; I make his way my own, immersing my life in his life, my love in his love, my existence in the sheltering home of his own Heart.

MEDITATION 19

To See and To Hold:

How Chastity Restores the Nakedness of Love

I introduced the reality of chastity in the last meditation by speaking about the “meeting of looks” between God and ourselves. This meeting of looks is the encounter of our thirst for love and God’s thirst to give this love, and indeed our thirst to give ourselves and God’s thirst to welcome us. The restless human heart, created for communion, experiences a deep solitude—and even a loneliness and isolation—which, in its depth, breadth, and intensity, is but the reverse side of the intimacy to which we are called.

Our very thirst for communion is a promise of communion; our very restless gaze, looking for the loving gaze of another, is a promise that such a gaze exists. The heart yearns to be seen, known, and cherished—and, in response to this cherishing gaze, to look in return upon the face and the mystery of the other. This is the meaning of the verse of Genesis that “the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed,” and indeed that they were, first of all, naked before God in complete filial trust. This was the case because they were still bathed in the radiance of God’s loving gaze, and saw each other within its light. Their glance, therefore, was not possessive, grasping, or dominating, but was a look of pure love—a look of reverence, of humble gratitude, of cherishing affirmation, and of welcoming acceptance and reciprocal self-gift.

It is precisely this spiritual nakedness of love—which overflows into and through the body—which allows persons to be united in intimacy. However, no longer, due to original sin, are we “naked without shame.” But nonetheless through a growing conformity to the loving vision of God himself, we can begin anew to see as we were created to see, to gaze as we are invited to gaze. Though within this creation there will never be a return to literal, physical nakedness, we can enter through God’s grace into the realm of *spiritual nakedness* in which heart encounters heart—in which the solitude of one person is joined together in an intimate “in-

terpenetration” with the solitude of another. This “joining of hearts,” indeed, is the very central reality of communion, even deeper and more intimate than any joining of the body.

To gaze always in reverent acceptance of this fundamental spiritual vulnerability of each person we encounter: this is the meaning of Christian chastity as directed to our brothers and sisters. Our loving look is meant, as it were, to “clothe” them in dignity and reverence, to honor and respect them, and indeed to affirm and bring to light their own unique and unrepeatable beauty. This occurs when they are seen, not in the light of any thing that they can give to us or do for us, or even through their secondary qualities of body or character, but through the innermost mystery of their belovedness before God.

In this way, through gazing upon them in loving faith, we touch their true identity in God, their unrepeatable personal mystery. And, indeed, through this gaze we can “set free” within them this beautiful reality, of which they themselves might not be aware. But when they encounter it reflected in our gaze, unveiled in our tender love for them, they can return “home” to the authentic truth of their heart, and learn to open this heart anew to the intimacy for which they thirst.

Chastity, therefore, is a way of seeing, a way of reverently looking in order to affirm, shelter, and clothe the beloved in the cradling arms of love for which they thirst. But this is not all that chastity is. In speaking of the “arms of love” we are led to the second element. Not only does the human heart yearn to be seen in love, and to look lovingly in return, but it also yearns, in a special way, *for the experience of being held*.

The woman bears a special sensitivity to this, a more intense and explicit awareness of her yearning to be held in the sheltering arms of another. But the same is true for the man, especially in relation to God, the heavenly Father, as we will soon see. The reason we yearn so deeply to be held is twofold: first of all, because we are profoundly aware of our own insecurity and inadequacy. Our hearts cry out: I cannot hold myself! I cannot safeguard and protect myself by my own power! I need another to be the space in which I find shelter, the space of protective love in which I am safe to open myself, to receive and to give without the fear of being hurt, abused, or wounded.

The second reason we yearn to be held is because, as we said, we have been created for intimacy. Our hearts cannot rest enclosed only within

their own solitude; rather, we inherently yearn to entrust this solitude into the hands and heart of another—yes, to let our solitude “dwell” in the embrace of their solitude, our mystery within the welcoming mystery of who they are. This thirst to be held, therefore, goes hand in hand with the thirst to be seen in love—and in this loving glance to be cherished, understood, and desired. The embrace of love is but the expression, the flowering, of the look of love.

But how can we find such a look, such an embrace? Clearly, in our world there are many persons—probably the majority—who are incapable of offering either this look or this embrace. We should therefore not expect it from them, but humbly and realistically recognize their limitations. On the other hand, there are persons—persons who are themselves united to God, to his vision and his embrace—who can manifest for us the reality for which we thirst, and indeed can grant us an intimate experience of it. If we are given to encounter such a person, this is a great grace which we should welcome from God, for which we should give thanks, and which we should live through sharing our heart with this person and letting them love us.

But ultimately the solitude of our heart, made a reflection of the very divine immensity, can find rest only in the eyes and the Heart of God himself. Therefore we are invited to open our hearts to a mystery beyond: *to the One who unceasingly gazes upon us in love and who cradles us always in his tenderest embrace.* In him we find the Love that we seek, the intimacy for which our hearts thirst. It is he whose eyes of love see us through and through, in every aspect of who we are, and cherish us unceasingly in tenderest love and ardent delight. It is he whose presence envelops us and holds us as we yearn to be held, in arms that do not force, do not hurt, but which also never pull away and never leave us for a single moment.

Finally, within this enveloping Love of God, who sees us and cradles us always, we find ourselves able to be united with others, our brothers and sisters, in an ever deeper and more authentic way. Indeed, because we know ourselves to be seen and held, we can see and hold...we can love and embrace in some way as God himself loves and embraces. Yes, our life and our relationships can become a reflection of the very inner life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Persons of the Trinity exist in an eternal state of spiritual nakedness, in which each Person gazes lovingly

upon the others and receives in turn their loving gaze, and in which they give themselves to each other so totally that they are united in a perfect cherishing embrace, holding one another intimately in a ceaseless mutual indwelling.

We were created, thus, both to be held and to hold, to be seen and to see...but above all we are invited to let ourselves be held, to let ourselves be seen. This is because, before anything else, we are simply little children of the Father, simply the beloved of Jesus Christ. Only from within this, and never departing from it, can we also see and hold others within God's own vision and embrace. Perhaps to bring this meditation to a close, and to express this relationship between being seen and seeing, between being held and holding, it is fitting to quote something written in my own personal journal:

How much, dear God, how much the human heart thirsts to be lovingly held and cradled... I see this in every person, but especially in women, who have a special sensitivity to this. It is amazing: women are a kind of loving "womb," a space of sheltering, protective, cherishing tenderness... and yet woman also needs and yearns herself to be sheltered, protected, and cherished.

Here we see the relation between authentic masculinity and femininity—an image of the Trinity, and of each person's relation to the Trinity.

The woman can hold when she is herself held.

The human heart can hold when it is first held by you.

The Son can hold us all—in his Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection—because he is always held, Father, by you.

The Immaculate Virgin can hold God in her heart and her womb because she is first and always held by you, enfolded in your grace and Love.

I can receive you, your gift, your life—and can receive and lovingly hold my brothers and sisters—because you, my God, hold me, always and without ceasing, in the infinite tenderness of your Love.

MEDITATION 20

Set Me as a Seal upon Your Heart: The Meaning of Intercessory Prayer

As I begin this final meditation, I feel drawn to speak of the meaning and beauty of intercessory prayer. However, there is very little that I want to say, not because there is little to say, but because what can be said is very little in comparison with the depth of the reality. Also, it is something so intimate that there is a kind of interior disinclination to try putting it into words. But has not everything I have said so far been intimate? Of course, there is nothing more intimate than the breathtaking union that blossoms between the human heart and God...this beautiful exchange of loving looks that allows hearts themselves to communicate and to be woven together in a single life of love. Indeed, in saying that, I have, ultimately, said everything, since this is God's ultimate and all-encompassing desire: *to enfold each one of his precious children within the tenderness of his cradling embrace, and, within this embrace, to make all of us one with each other in the single Mystery of his all-encompassing Love.*

Whenever I encounter such an amazing, awe-inspiring Love, I am profoundly healed in the innermost recesses of my being, and my life itself is bathed in a radiant and beautiful light. We have seen all of this above. Yes, I find the true and deepest meaning of my life in being God's *beloved*, in letting my existence unfold in childlike playfulness and joy, in spousal ardor, as I welcome each moment as a gift of his Love and entrust myself totally to him in return. Indeed, all created things begin to reveal the radiant light of the Beloved's countenance, shining through the veil that has been stretched thin by God's own prodigal generosity.

In response to this awesome gift—and cradled always in this Love from which, as Jesus said, nothing can snatch me away (cf. Jn 10:28-29)—my heart dilates and expands to love in return. Yes, I have spoken much about “heart-healing” throughout these meditations, about the healing that occurs when my searching gaze encounters the loving and

cherishing gaze of God, when my thirst encounters God's even more ardent thirst for me. But I have also spoken about the fragrant flower and succulent fruit of adoration, in which my heart, amazed at the Beauty of the One who looks upon me in such a way, who touches me so tenderly and lovingly, cries out in gratitude and jubilation. I have spoken about the spontaneous desire to pour myself out as a perfume of love upon the sacred Body of Jesus, simply in order to praise him who is worthy of all praise, to love him who is infinitely lovable. This is simply to be caught up into the very throbbing of the divine Heartbeat, the movement of Love that is eternally passing between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is to allow this surging movement, pouring forth into me through God's loving gaze, through his arms that embrace me, to surge back to him anew in the complete childlike abandonment of myself to him in return.

In this place my littleness and weakness is cradled in the tenderness of the Trinity's Love, and I am liberated by the abiding touch of his grace, which sustains me at every moment within the lightheartedness of love that allows me even to walk on the stormy water of this world with my gaze fixed upon the radiance of the Beloved who illumines even the darkest night. Ah, yes...I am held unceasingly by God. This is the cause of my freedom to rejoice, to play, and to adore. It is also the cause of my freedom to intercede, not in the superficial way that we often tend to think of this—asking God to do things in the lives of others which he may not intend to do—but in the profound truth of the actual reality.

What, then, does it truly mean to pray for others, my brothers and sisters...for all of those entrusted to me within the Love of God, and indeed for all of humanity? From the very space of God's Love which touches me, from within his cradling arms, my heart expands to see, to know, and to love others as his beloved children, in the very light of Love that has revealed to me my own identity as his child. When this recognition occurs, then I cannot do anything else but what Christ himself has done—and yet I do it simply by entrusting myself into his arms and allowing him to perpetuate within and through me his own saving, redeeming, and healing mystery.

And what, then, does Christ do? We saw this in the previous meditation. We saw already the deepest meaning of intercession, the deepest meaning of love for our brothers and sisters—expressed in our incarnate

God, Jesus Christ, and in the great intercessor, Mary: *The Son can hold us all—in his Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection—because he is always held, Father, by you... The Immaculate Virgin can hold God in her heart and her womb because she is first and always held by you, enfolded in your grace and Love... I can receive you, your gift, your life—and can receive and lovingly hold my brothers and sisters—because you, my God, hold me, always and without ceasing, in the infinite tenderness of your Love.*

This is how I pray for others, not by recounting in detail all their problems and sufferings, their struggles and hopes, nor the particular things which I may think God could or should do for them. Rather, I simply hold them—in all the details of their life, in the whole of their existence, and especially in their unique personal mystery, ineffably beautiful in the eyes of God. I simply hold them, in the silence of my heart, before God. Or more accurately, I hold them as God himself holds me. As he cradles me in his embrace and sets me as a seal upon his inmost Heart, so I let them be set, forever, as a seal upon my heart, and cradle them unceasingly within my inner being.

Does not every heart thirst to be held, to be tenderly embraced in the shelter of another...in their cherishing, understanding, protecting embrace? Does not every heart thirst to be seen, to be known, to be intimately and ardently desired? This is what I try to do: *to hold and to see*. To hold with a gaze of love, and to gaze while holding...holding, indeed, the profound mystery of each person which surpasses all earthly sight, but which draws the heart on toward the full vision of eternity.

Yes, to hold another in this way, when I first let myself be held by God, proves to be an extension, through me, of the very cradling Love of God himself. Thus my loving embrace, my sheltering prayer, can truly be a wall of defense for others, and a space of sheltering and healing love. It can indeed be a kind of “womb” in which, protected, nourished, and cherished, their unique mystery is awakened and set free for ever deeper union with the Trinity.

To hold and to see. But also to receive...to receive the outpouring of God’s Love into myself, and to receive it while I hold them. Thus, as I receive, my reception can “carve out a space” also in the hearts of others, as I receive for them and in their name. They may not yet be open to receive; they may not be ready or willing to look into God’s loving gaze

upon them. But I can receive on their behalf, and my receiving—through our profound and inseparable union within the Body of Christ—can open a space for them also to receive.

Finally, as I hold, as I gaze, and as I receive—both for myself and for them—I surrender all totally back into the welcoming embrace of the One from whom all has come. As a little child, afraid and in tears, will calm down only when picked up and held by her mother, so, knowing that I myself am a little child, I let myself be held always by God. And, as he holds me, he enables me also to hold others as a father or mother, cradling and calming them mysteriously through the tenderness of my spiritual embrace. And this very calming embrace is what allows surrender to be born in their heart...that act of loving and trust-filled abandonment into the care of the one who embraces.

This is the mystery, my God, which surpasses words, rich in its beauty and its mystery. It is a reality that goes beyond ordinary human experience, unfolding in the realm of faith, hope, and love. It unfolds in the space of perfect reconciliation, in the space of “universal convergence” which is the Risen Body of Jesus...which is his Heart, having descended lovingly into the deepest darkness and suffering of humanity, but only in order to rise to the heights of the Trinitarian embrace, taking us with him. Yes, in the Heart of Jesus all prayer unfolds, and here we are all inseparably united to one another in the cradling embrace of a single Mystery—for all human hearts are drawn together in him and are knit together within the sinews of his own Sacred Heart.

I simply abide in this place, in the innermost Heart’s-embrace of the Divine Lover, experiencing the throbbing of his Heart, which is totally one with the Heartbeat of the Father and the Holy Spirit. And in this place, as I listen to the beating of the Divine Heart, I also hear, pressed up close against my own heart, the heartbeat of my brothers and sisters, who have been entrusted to me by God. Yes, caught up in the midst of this profound communication of hearts, I simply hold as I am held, receive as I have been received, and surrender myself entirely in love. Thus I can allow the surging movement of Love to carry me, in union with all of my brothers and sisters, throughout this life and across the boundary of death, into the fullness of eternal life and the new creation, where we shall all be forevermore united, in the innermost embrace of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

