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CATHOLIC RETREATS

TROUBLE WITH TRUST
A RETREAT GUIDE FOR LENT

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INTRODUCTION

Retreat Overview

One of the Bible's most famous sentences is found in St. Paul's Letter to the Romans. It goes like this:

> *We know that all things work for good for those who love God.*
>
> – Romans 8:28

All things? Even horrible evils like mass murder and human trafficking? Does St. Paul mean that God can bring good even out of those things? Yes, that's exactly what St. Paul means. If we love God, if we are seeking the meaning of our lives in our relationship with God, then he will redeem *everything*.

How can St. Paul be so sure of this? He tells us that it's because of Christ's Passion — his suffering, death, and resurrection — which proved that God is completely trustworthy:

> *… If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him?*
>
> – Romans 8:38-39

All of us would like to believe this as deeply as St. Paul did, to trust God more firmly in the midst of life's trials. Lent is a season to strengthen our trust, precisely by turning our attention to Christ's Passion, and this Lenten Retreat Guide, *Trouble with Trust*, is designed to help.

- In the first meditation, we will discover why it is so hard for us to trust God, by going back to the Garden of Eden.
- In the second meditation, we will watch Jesus rebuild the bridge of trust between humanity and God, in the Garden of Gethsemane.
- And in the conference, we will go over some ways to exercise our own trust in God, and make it grow.

As we begin, let's take a few moments to renew our faith in God's presence, and in his interest in our lives, and let's open our hearts to him, in quiet praise and confident petition.

FIRST MEDITATION

Trust Dies in the Garden of Eden

The first two chapters of the Bible give us a portrait of God unlike anything else found in the ancient world.

Other ancient religions had myths and traditions depicting gods as powerful, but also as aloof and distant from human affairs, temperamental, and unpredictable, like the violent forces of the cosmos.

The God of the Bible is very different. In the Book of Genesis, God is shown creating the universe, which shows that he is superior to the forces of the cosmos; he transcends them. And after each stage of creation, Genesis shows God stepping back to look at what he created, and he admires it and calls it, "good."

Each realm of creation is designed and given existence by God and is filled with his wisdom and love. Creation is not only good in itself, but it also has a purpose — God creates the physical universe and then gives it as a gift to mankind, as a place for mankind to live and grow and flourish.

And when it comes to creating mankind, God gets even more intimately involved, forming human beings from the clay of the earth — he gets his hands dirty.

And in order to give us life, he doesn't reach down from a distance; on the contrary, he holds us so close to himself, to his own face, that he breathes his own divine breath into our nostrils.

And then, when he finishes making Adam and Eve and places them in the Garden of Eden, he doesn't abandon them; he stays close to them.

The Bible actually describes a relationship in which God would walk and talk with Adam and Eve in the Garden in the cool of the evenings.

These first two Chapters of Genesis show a God who is pure goodness, pure wisdom, pure, omnipotent generosity and love. That's the God of the Bible — a God who is absolutely, completely, infinitely trustworthy.

FIRST MEDITATION

A Universe Built on Trust

That trustworthiness is the bedrock of mankind's relationship with God.

Having received everything from the hands of a good, loving, and wise God, Adam and Eve are called in turn to contribute to God's wonderful creation through their own activity, through "filling the earth and subduing it" (Genesis 1:28), through "cultivating and caring for" the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15).

The world before original sin is a loving partnership between God and the human family, a friendship made possible by God's goodness and power and love.

Like all relationships, this one is built on mutual trust: God entrusts his creation to the care of Adam and Eve, and Adam and Eve entrust themselves to God's care through living in obedience to his wisdom — and that consists of accepting their natural limitations.

In the Bible, those limitations are expressed by the prohibition from eating fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. As long as this relationship of mutual trust endures, the harmony and justice of God's original creation will also endure.

In this way, the vivid language of these first chapters of Genesis shows us that from the very beginning, human beings were created to live in an interpersonal relationship with God and with one-another, in a relationship of mutual trust, in a shared friendship with God.

Trust, in other words, is at the very core of our identity and mission, at the very core of the whole purpose of the universe, in fact. And that's why the shattering of that trust resulted in such universal devastation.

FIRST MEDITATION

The Entrance of Evil

We all know what happened next.

The serpent, a symbolic representation of the devil, a fallen angel who had rebelled against God, slithers into the Garden of Eden.

He attacks Adam and Eve, spiritually, by telling a few lies and weaving a few deceptions, sowing seeds of suspicion. He makes Adam and Eve suspicious of God, of God's motives for creating them and for requiring them to respect their natural limitations.

In fact, the devil even implies that they really don't have any natural limitations; that if they throw off the shackles of obedience, they will become all-powerful; they will be "like gods" (Genesis 3:5).

The devil strained mankind's trust in God, attacking the core of the created universe itself, putting the original harmony and justice of God's creation in mortal danger.

FIRST MEDITATION

A Necessary Test

Have you ever wondered why God permitted the devil to enter the Garden of Eden and tempt Adam and Eve in the first place? We will never be able to fully fathom that mystery, but we can fathom it a little bit.

Imagine what would have happened if Adam and Eve had resisted that temptation, if they had been victorious over the devil's attack. How would that have affected their relationship with God? Surely it wouldn't have simply been the same. Having been faithful under fire would have deepened their relationship with God.

Anytime we continue to love faithfully through a trial, our love grows. Anytime a spouse resists a temptation to infidelity, the marital bond is strengthened. Anytime friends stick together through thick and thin, that friendship becomes more meaningful, more fulfilling, more beautiful.

If Adam and Eve had successfully resisted the attack on their friendship with God, the Garden of Eden would have become even more glorious than God had made it in the first place.

That's why God allowed them to be tempted: to give them a chance to love more, to freely affirm their true identity, to glorify God and grow in wisdom, joy, courage, and everything else that makes life worth living. And that's why God allows us to be tested too.

He knows that if we tap into his grace in order to stay faithful to him through temptations, trials, and suffering, our trust will be strengthened, and so our relationship with him will deepen and grow, and we will enter more fully into his glory.

FIRST MEDITATION

Conclusion: The Fall

But Adam and Eve failed their test.

The seeds of suspicion sown by the devil took root and sprouted. They lost their confidence in God; they ate the forbidden fruit; and the original harmony, justice and beauty of God's creation was shattered.

Their sin was disobedience, but that disobedience flowed from a breakdown of trust. That was the real original sin, the sin that gave origin to evil and suffering in the world, the sin that has spread like a plague ever since into every human heart, family, and society.

By distrusting God, Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and by disobeying God, they betrayed their mission and destroyed the world they had been given. Here is how the Catechism summarizes this tragic drama of original sin:

Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's command. This is what man's first sin consisted of. All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in his goodness

– CCC 397

From that moment on, salvation history depended on rebuilding trust between God and mankind, and the redemption of each individual human being depended on our ability to somehow rehabilitate the trust in God that original sin had so effectively injured.

Trust was at the core of God's original plan for the universe; it was attacked and broken when evil invaded our world; and, as we will see in the next meditation, it was magnificently recovered by our Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

But for now, let's take some time to reflect prayerfully on God's goodness and trustworthiness, as it is revealed to us in the first chapters of the Bible, and on the tragic distrust of our first parents, which, unfortunately, is like a mirror of our own distrust.

The following questions and biblical quotations may help your meditation.

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

1. God's goodness shows forth in his work of creation. Read the following quotation from the Catechism and try to explain it in my own words:

Scripture and Tradition never cease to teach and celebrate this fundamental truth: "The world was made for the glory of God." St. Bonaventure explains that God created all things "not to increase his glory, but to show it forth and to communicate it," for God has no other reason for creating than his love and goodness: Creatures came into existence when the key of love opened his hand.

– CCC 293

2. What motives can I think of to help convince myself that God is trustworthy? When do I find it hardest to trust in God, and why?

3. Many non-Christians refuse to believe in God because they see an abundance of evil and injustice in the world. How does what God has revealed to us about original sin help us acknowledge that evil without losing our faith?

Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation

God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them;male and female he created them. God blessed them and God said to them: Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that crawl on the earth. God also said: See, I give you every seed-bearing plant on all the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food; and to all the wild animals, all the birds of the air, and all the living creatures that crawl on the earth, I give all the green plants for food. And so it happened. God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good. Evening came, and morning followed — the sixth day.

– Genesis 1:27-31, NABRE

... [T]hen the LORD God formed the man out of the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made grow every tree that was delightful to look at and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The LORD God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it. The LORD God gave the man this order: You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and evil. From that tree you shall not eat; when you eat from it you shall die.

– Genesis 2:7-9, 15-17 NABRE

Now the snake was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made. He asked the woman, "Did God really say, 'You shall not eat from any of the trees in the garden'?" The woman answered the snake: "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; a it is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, 'You shall not eat it or even touch it, or else you will die.'" But the snake said to the woman: "You certainly will not die! God knows well that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, who know good and evil." The woman saw that the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eyes, and the tree was desirable for gaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. When they heard the sound of the LORD God walking about in the garden at the breezy time of the day, the man and his wife hid themselves from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

– Genesis 3:1-8, NABRE

SECOND MEDITATION

Trust Recovered in the Garden of Gethsemane

Throughout the history of the Old Testament, God never gave up on the human family, even though, with every sin, the human family kept giving up on him.

And when the time was right, God himself took human flesh in order to do what no merely human being could do: reestablish once and forever a bedrock of total trust, an everlasting bridge, between himself and mankind. This, essentially, was the mission of Jesus Christ.

In order to redeem the universe, and the human race, Jesus had to restore the very core of everything: he had to restore the trust that had been shattered.

He did this through his humble, loving obedience, the signature mark of his entire life, from the moment of the Incarnation right up through the moment of the Ascension.

Here's how St. Paul summarizes Christ's redeeming mission:

Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name...

Philippians 2:5-9

Christ's obedience repaired the damage done to the human family, and to the universe as a whole, by the disobedience of original sin.

And it was Christ's unswerving trust in his Father that fueled his heroic obedience.

SECOND MEDITATION

Jesus Under Attack

Jesus, true God but also true man, experienced temptation. Just like each of us, Jesus was attacked by the devil, and the attacks were always directed towards breaking down his trust in his Father.

At the very beginning of his ministry, he spent forty days in the desert, where he was "tempted by the devil" (Matthew 4:1).

The devil tried to convince Jesus to follow a different path than the one his Father wanted; he tried to confuse him in the same ways he so often confuses us.

- By tempting Jesus to turn stones into bread, the devil tried to trick him into using his gifts for self-centered purposes.
- By tempting Jesus to jump from the pinnacle of the temple and remain miraculously unharmed, the devil tried to trick him into winning approval and acceptance through force and manipulation instead of through love and respect.
- By offering Jesus political control over the entire world in exchange for worshipping Satan, the devil tried to trick Jesus into building an earthly kingdom instead of a heavenly kingdom.

But none of those attacks worked. Jesus saw through the devil's tricks and deceptions, and refused to give up on his Father's will. And so, the Gospels tell us, the devil "departed from him for a time" (Luke 4:13).

SECOND MEDITATION

Jesus Under Attack Again

That period of time came to an end on Holy Thursday, when Jesus went into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray after the Last Supper.

On the eve of his trial, torture, and crucifixion, Jesus found himself under attack once again. This time the devil changed tactics, just as he does with us.

He no longer used deception to try and trick Jesus into abandoning his Father's will. Instead, he used pain, and sorrow, and suffering. In the Garden of Gethsemane, the devil made Jesus feel the moral pain that comes from the guilt of sin.

Even though Jesus himself never sinned, in Gethsemane, he took upon himself all of our sins, to the point where St. Paul could write: "For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Some theologians also speculate that the devil brought to Jesus' mind all the people who would reject him through the ages, who would betray and disparage him, who would refuse to accept the gift of forgiveness and salvation that he suffered so much to be able to offer us.

Is there any pain greater than the haunting, interior agony that comes from committing evil, recognizing the damage it caused, and being helpless to undo that damage? Is there any pain greater than being mocked and rejected by those you love most?

These are the pains that Jesus experienced on that fateful night; these were the attacks the devil used in order to try and make Jesus choose a different path, to make him lose trust in his Father's will.

So horrible was the suffering he experienced, in fact, that his entire nervous system and physical organism entered into a kind of shock, causing him to sweat blood. The Gospels tell us that Jesus "… began to feel… sorrow and distress… troubled… sorrowful unto death… agony…" (Matthew 26:37-38, Mark 14:33-34, Luke 22:44). So intense was his suffering that he asked his Father to "let this cup pass from me" (Matthew 26:39).

SECOND MEDITATION

The Victory of Trust

Was the devil's new tactic succeeding? Was Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane going to abandon the Father's will, just as Adam had done in the Garden of Eden?

No — Jesus shows us his full humanity; he shows us that he too experienced the horrible suffering that comes to us in this fallen world, but unlike Adam and the rest of us sinners, his trust doesn't die. He finishes his prayer in Gethsemane by saying, "yet, not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39).

The rest of his Passion — betrayal, arrest, condemnation, scourging, crowning with thorns, and crucifixion — is simply an extension of this attack of the devil, who is desperately trying to shatter Jesus' trust in his Father's will.

But Jesus stays faithful to his Father, until, as he breathes his last from the bloody throne of his cross, he can affirm the complete success of his redeeming mission: "It is finished" (John 19:30).

When Jesus taught us to pray the Our Father, the daily prayer of every Christian, he was teaching us that our journey through this fallen world is meant to follow in his footsteps, that we, united to him through grace and faith, are called to rebuild in our hearts the trust that he recovered for us. This is why he wants us to pray each day the same prayer that he prayed in Gethsemane: "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10).

If we trustingly persevere in God's will through our Gesthemanes and our Good Fridays, we will, together with Jesus, experience our own Easter Sundays, growing in the new life of an ever deeper communion with God.

SECOND MEDITATION

Conclusion: Trust and the Meaning of Life

And that's where the meaning of life comes from — living in communion with God, in a deep, personal relationship of mutual trust with our Lord.

And so, the very center of our lives, the very core of true happiness and fulfillment, is to be found in rehabilitating our trust in God, in making our way, steadily and gradually, from the old inheritance of our first parents — the tragic distrust of the Garden of Eden — to the new inheritance that is ours in Christ Jesus, the heroic, transforming, redeeming trust at work in the Garden of Gethsemane.

In the conference, we will look at some tried-and-true spiritual practices that can help strengthen our trust in God, but for now, let's take some time to prayerfully reflect on the redeeming example of Jesus, our Savior, who rebuilt the bridge of trust between the human family and the God who loves us. The following questions and Bible passages may help your meditation.

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

1. I believe that Jesus truly is my "Savior" and "Redeemer." But what do those words mean for me? What should they mean for me?

2. What am I expecting from God in my life? Am I expecting to be protected from suffering, or to be given — through Christ, with him, and in him — the strength, the grace, to continue trusting God even in the midst of suffering? How do I usually react to my own "Gethsemane" moments, and why?

3. Lent is a season when the Church asks each of us to prepare ourselves to celebrate the Paschal Mystery, the redeeming events of Christ's Passion and Resurrection, at the end of Holy Week. In the past, how much have my Lenten practices really helped me do that? What can I do this Lent to prepare myself even better?

Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation

Let us lie in wait for the righteous one, because he is annoying to us; he opposes our actions, reproaches us for transgressions of the law and charges us with violations of our training. He professes to have knowledge of God and styles himself a child of the LORD. To us he is the censure of our thoughts; merely to see him is a hardship for us, because his life is not like that of others, and different are his ways. He judges us debased; he holds aloof from our paths as from things impure. He calls blest the destiny of the righteous and boasts that God is his Father. Let us see whether his words be true; let us find out what will happen to him in the end. For if the righteous one is the son of God, God will help him and deliver him from the hand of his foes. With violence and torture let us put him to the test that we may have proof of his gentleness and try his patience. Let us condemn him to a shameful death; for according to his own words, God will take care of him." These were their thoughts, but they erred; for their wickedness blinded them, and they did not know the hidden counsels of God; neither did they count on a recompense for holiness nor discern the innocent souls' reward. For God formed us to be imperishable; the image of his own nature he made us. But by the envy of the devil, death entered the world, and they who are allied with him experience it.

– Wisdom 2:12-24, NABRE
[The Prophecy of the Passion]

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why so far from my call for help, from my cries of anguish? My God, I call by day, but you do not answer; by night, but I have no relief. Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the glory of Israel. In you our fathers trusted; they trusted and you rescued them. To you they cried out and they escaped; in you they trusted and were not disappointed. But I am a worm, not a man, scorned by men, despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they curl their lips and jeer; they shake their heads at me: "He relied on the LORD—let him deliver him; if he loves him, let him rescue him." For you drew me forth from the womb, made me safe at my mother's breasts. Upon you I was thrust from the womb; since my mother bore me you are my God. Do not stay far from me, for trouble is near, and there is no one to help.

– Psalm 22:2-12 NABRE
[The Psalm Jesus prayed from the Cross]

Many bulls surround me; fierce bulls of Bashan encircle me. They open their mouths against me, lions that rend and roar. Like water my life drains away; all my bones are disjointed. My heart has become like wax, it melts away within me. As dry as a potsherd is my throat; my tongue cleaves to my palate; you lay me in the dust of death. Dogs surround me; a pack of evildoers closes in on me. They have pierced my hands and my feet; I can count all my bones. They stare at me and gloat; they divide my garments among them; for my clothing they cast lots. But you, LORD, do not stay far off; my strength, come quickly to help me. Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the grip of the dog. Save me from the lion's mouth, my poor life from the horns of wild bulls. Then I will proclaim your name to my brethren; in the assembly I will praise you: "You who fear the LORD, give praise! All descendants of Jacob, give honor; show reverence, all descendants of Israel! For he has not spurned or disdained the misery of this poor wretch, did not turn away from me, but heard me when I cried out. I will offer praise in the great assembly; my vows I will fulfill before those who fear him. The poor will eat their fill; those who seek the LORD will offer praise. May your hearts enjoy life forever!"

– Psalm 22:13-27 NABRE
[The Psalm Jesus prayed from the Cross]

All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD; all the families of nations will bow low before him. For kingship belongs to the LORD, the ruler over the nations. All who sleep in the earth will bow low before God; All who have gone down into the dust will kneel in homage. And I will live for the LORD; my descendants will serve you. The generation to come will be told of the Lord, that they may proclaim to a people yet unborn the deliverance you have brought.

– Psalm 22:28-32 NABRE
[The Psalm Jesus prayed from the Cross]

CONFERENCE

Trusting More

God gave us the raw material for a deep, mature, intimately trusting relationship with him when we were baptized. The great gift of this sacrament, in fact, was the beginning of our lifelong journey out of the distrust that characterized the Garden of Eden towards the total trust that characterized the Garden of Gethsemane.

With the grace of baptism came what theologians call the "infused virtues," most especially the Big Three Supernatural — or Theological — Virtues of faith, hope, and love. These virtues repaired our capacity for trust in God that was broken by original sin.

With these virtues, our merely human nature was brought back into communion with God; it was super-charged, so to speak, and given supernatural capacities.

- By the gift of faith, our minds were given the potential to know God as he knows himself, and to see all things — ourselves, others, and the world around us — as God sees them.

- By the gift of hope, our souls were given the potential to desire a happiness that goes way beyond the good things of this world, a happiness that is truly divine and everlasting.

- By the gift of love, our hearts were given the potential to live just as Christ lived, loving God and neighbor with the same infinite and transforming love that characterizes God himself.

Now, when these Big Three Supernatural Virtues are working together, they move us to trust in God. And when we second that movement, actually trusting God in specific situations, the Big Three grow and get stronger, and when that happens, they move us more readily to trust in God even more.

All of this may seem complicated and overly philosophical, but it's important for us to realize that growing in trust doesn't just happen by us trying harder. Our relationship with God is supernatural, established, nourished and sustained by God himself; he is at work in the depths of our souls to lead us towards deeper intimacy with him. All of our efforts are a response to what God is already doing. In other words, we don't achieve intimacy with God; rather, we receive the gift of a relationship with him and then develop it through our cooperation with God's grace.

Okay, now we are ready to get practical and look at three tried-and-true spiritual exercises by which we can cooperate with God's grace, strengthening our trust and putting into action the supernatural virtues that are already at work within us. If you are already using these exercises, maybe this conference will give you a boost of encouragement, so that you keep on using them. But you also may discover some new ideas — listen to whatever strikes you most, and don't wait to start putting it into practice.

CONFERENCE

Vocal Prayer

The first way to exercise and grow our trust in God is the most obvious: vocal prayer.

Vocal prayer is the kind of prayer in which we use someone else's words. The Our Father, for example, is a vocal prayer. Whether we pray it out loud or silently, we are still using someone else's words — in this case, the words of Jesus himself.

The real benefit of vocal prayer comes when we think about what we are praying, because in all the great vocal prayers of the Church and of the saints, the meaning of the words expresses the deep truths of our faith.

And so, when we really mean what we are praying, we feed our souls with those truths, nourishing and strengthening our faith, hope, and love, exercising and increasing our trust in God.

One of my favorite vocal prayers, written by Blessed John Henry Newman, is called "Lead, Kindly Light." It starts like this:

Lead, Kindly Light, amidst th'encircling gloom, lead Thou me on! The night is dark, and I am far from home, lead Thou me on! Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see the distant scene; one step enough for me.

Those words address God as a kindly light amid the darkness of our often painful and confusing earthly journey; they express deep confidence in God. Praying and meaning those words, especially when we feel anxiety and fear, exercises and builds up the trust that we already have in God.

We should all have our favorite vocal prayers, whether taken from the Scriptures, Church tradition, or our preferred spiritual writers, and we should use them often — even while doing housework or driving in the car.

Heartfelt vocal prayer is the first and simplest way to exercise and grow our trust in God.

CONFERENCE

Holy Silence

Vocal prayer is very active; we have to actively concentrate in order to do it.

The second way to exercise and deepen our trust in God is an entirely different kind of activity. The Catechism calls it contemplative prayer; some spiritual writers refer to it as the prayer of simplicity; in the context of this Retreat Guide, I would like to call it Holy Silence.

God is always thinking of us and speaking to us, sending us his messages of love and wisdom. He never stops reaching out to each one of us; as the Catechism puts it, "At every time and in every place, God draws close to man" (CCC 1).

But so often we are not very aware of God's presence. Our lives are so noisy and busy that we only occasionally take notice of his ongoing efforts to show us how much he loves us, how good he is, how trustworthy.

Holy Silence is a spiritual discipline by which we turn away from life's noise and busy-ness and simply allow God's presence and voice to occupy our attention. It can take many forms.

- It could be simply a walk in the woods, admiring the sights and sounds and smells of God's creation.
- It could be gazing at a beautiful work of art, to contemplate it, to listen to it, to let beauty speak to us.
- It could be simply sitting in a chapel and gazing at the tabernacle, not even saying anything, not even thinking of much, but simply being with the Lord, allowing his presence to penetrate our mind and heart.

Great music and literature can also be a means for practicing Holy Silence; they too contain the kind of transcendent beauty that resonates in the depths of our souls, stirring up our desire for God.

St. John of the Cross often used to sit in his monastic cell and simply gaze out the window and allow the beauty of God's creation to saturate his mind and heart — it was one of his favorite ways to pray.

This is Holy Silence: regularly taking time to "listen to the essence of things," as one ancient philosopher put it. It isn't merely daydreaming; rather, it's a deep listening, an opening of the soul to the message of God's love and glory hidden in every corner of his creation. It is like an embrace between two lovers — no words are spoken, and yet so much is said.

When we make Holy Silence a regular part of our lives, we actually get to know God better, and his goodness and power become more real to us, and that gives us a stronger, deeper, more stable foundation for trusting in him.

Holy Silence is directly contrary to the frenetic, superficial, titillating, achievement-oriented lifestyle of our super-secularized world.

As a result, we have a tendency to feel guilty for indulging in it, but it has been a tried-and-true practice among Christians since the Church's earliest days, so we would be foolish to throw it out the window just because it's no longer popular.

CONFERENCE

Intentional Obedience

Vocal prayer and Holy Silence help anchor our minds and hearts in God's trustworthiness.

But the anchor can come loose if we don't behave in accordance with that trustworthiness. And that leads us to the third spiritual practice for exercising and deepening our trust in God: intentional obedience.

If you are using this Retreat Guide, you are probably trying to live in accordance with God's will for your life:

- ○ You probably make a decent effort to fulfill the responsibilities of your situation in life.
- ○ You probably make a concerted effort to fulfill God's commandments — going to Mass on Sundays, not lying or stealing, serving and helping those around you instead of criticizing and exploiting them.
- ○ You probably look for ways to share your faith with those who have no faith, or to encourage those whose faith is wavering under trials.

That's how we exercise our Christian obedience; anyone who consciously refuses to do those things is deviating from the only road that leads to spiritual maturity.

But the secular philosophies of the modern and post-modern worlds have penetrated our minds more than we realize, and we can sometimes do the right thing for the wrong reason. Our obedience, instead of being a heartfelt response to what our loving Father is asking of us, can become an attempt to make ourselves perfect.

It can become duty for duty's sake, instead of duty as an expression of gratitude towards and confidence in and love for the God who created us and calls us into relationship with him.

These normal, daily acts of obedience to God's will can become powerful means for growth in trust, if we live them intentionally, from the heart as well as from the head. And that's not so hard to do.

It can be as simple as saying a silent prayer of offering before a meeting or a chore, or a silent prayer of thanksgiving after resisting a temptation or performing an act of mercy.

Intentional, heartfelt obedience is obedience that not only makes an effort to do what God wants, but, in the words of Pope Clement XI, to do it as God wants, because God wants it, and as long as God wants.

It's the obedience of a child who loves and trusts his mother and father, as opposed to the obedience of a prisoner who fears the warden's whip. As Jesus taught us:

> *Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.*
>
> – Matthew 18:3

When we live our Christian obedience like that, from the heart, each of our actions becomes an expression of supernatural trust, an act of worship, and a bridge to greater intimacy with God.

CONFERENCE

Conclusion: Onward, Christian Soldier!

Vocal Prayer, Holy Silence, and Intentional Obedience — these are three tried and true spiritual practices guaranteed to exercise and strengthen our trust in God, and they are within the reach of each one of us.

Take some time now to go over the ten questions of the personal questionnaire; let the Holy Spirit use them to give you fresh encouragement and new ideas in your ongoing journey towards Christian fulfillment.

1. Explain in my own words why trust in God is so central to growing in our Christian life.

2. What personal experiences have I had that may be at work in my subconscious, making it hard for me to grow in my trust in God?

3. What role does vocal prayer play in my life right now? How can I take better advantage of this means for spiritual growth?

4. Explain in my own words what "Holy Silence" is all about and how it can help us grow in trust.

5. Think about times or situations in which I have experienced Holy Silence. What was it like? How did it make me feel? How did it affect my attitude and behavior?

6. Where do I find it easiest to "listen to the essence of things": in nature, art, music...?

7. What can I do to intentionally make room for Holy Silence in my life on a regular basis?

8. Make a quick examination of conscience: Is there any sector of my life where I am habitually and intentionally being disobedient to God? Repent and ask God for the grace to lovingly, trustingly surrender that sector to him. Try to think of a concrete step I can take to get the help I need to change in that area.

9. How often do I turn my attention to God throughout my normal daily activities? What helps me do that? What hinders me from doing that?

10. How would the general state of my soul be different if I lived my normal Christian obedience more intentionally?

NOTES

Record Your Thoughts Here

FURTHER READING

For Reflection & Prayer

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

- *Jesus of Nazareth, Part II: Holy Week from the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*
  by Pope Benedict XVI
- *Trustful Surrender to Divine Providence: The Secret of Peace and Happiness*
  by Fr. Jean-Baptiste Saint-Jure
  and Blessed Claude de la Colombiere
- *Peace of Soul*
  by Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen
- *Abandonment to Divine Providence*
  by Fr. Jean-Pierre de Caussade
- *Inside the Passion*
  by Fr. John Bartunek, LC

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