THE ONE THING NEEDED
A RETREAT GUIDE ON MARTHA AND MARY

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INTRODUCTION

Retreat Overview

Way back in the Golden Age of Hollywood, around the time of World War II, a classic movie was almost aborted. In fact, its producers were offered full compensation for the entire cost of the film, if they would agree to destroy it instead of releasing it to the public. That's how controversial this movie was.

But they didn't destroy it. They released it, in September 1941, and it ended up being nominated for nine Academy Awards. It also ended up becoming one of the few films that all the critics and filmmakers ever since consistently speak of as perhaps the greatest movie of all time. In polls and surveys, it always seems to find its place near the top of the list. The movie is called *Citizen Kane*.

It's about Charles Foster Kane, a man who has everything: worldwide fame, unlimited wealth, terrifying power… And yet, in spite of having all those things, he dies sad and unfulfilled.

As the movie begins, the cameras slowly make their way towards Kane's deathbed, first giving the viewers an eerie tour of his immense estate, which includes breathtakingly beautiful grounds, a private zoo, and manicured gardens. Then we are brought into his vast mansion, and the cameras show us endless rooms crammed with innumerable artistic and cultural treasures and gorgeous, elaborate furnishings. Finally we are brought into the presence of the dying man, who holds in his hand a little toy that reminds him of his boyhood. Wistfully thinking of his lost youth, unsatisfied, frustrated, and sorrowful, he passes away, with a mysterious word on his lips.

The rest of the film is an attempt to find out the meaning of that mysterious word, and consists of a series of flashbacks that show how he had acquired so much, and yet lived so unhappy a life.

And that is a question we all need to think about from time to time. We can pursue so many things in life — approval, awards, comfort, fame, influence, money, pleasure, popularity, possessions, success… But which of these will truly bring us the fulfillment we yearn for?

Among the vast array of all that the world offers us, what is the one thing that really matters?

In this Retreat Guide, *The One Thing Needed: A Retreat Guide on Martha and Mary*, that's what we will reflect on.

- In the first meditation, we will look at what Jesus calls "the one thing needed."
- In the second meditation, we will look at the relationship between that one thing and all the other things that make up our daily life.
- And in the conference, we will review God's own not-so-secret formula for helping us keep our priorities straight: the Third Commandment.

None of us wants to reach the end of life filled only with sorrow, regret, and frustration, like Citizen Kane; we want to find and experience the meaning that God created us to enjoy. As we start this retreat, let's take a few moments to tell that to Jesus once again, in the silence of our hearts:

- let's renew our faith in the power of his truth to guide us through the ups and downs of life;
- let's renew our hope in the power of his goodness to fulfill our deepest desires;
- and let's renew our humble love for him who created us, redeemed us, and calls us, every single day, to live a more and more abundant life by choosing the one thing needed.

FIRST MEDITATION

Luke 10:38-42

To begin, let's prayerfully read through the Gospel passage that we will be meditating on, Luke 10:38-42.

As they continued their journey he [Jesus] entered a village where a woman whose name was Martha welcomed him. She had a sister named Mary [who] sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak. Martha, burdened with much serving, came to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me." The Lord said to her in reply, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her."

FIRST MEDITATION

Friendship with Jesus Is the One Thing Needed

Friendship with Jesus Is the One Thing Needed. If Jesus Christ truly is the one Lord of life and history, the one Savior, the one Way, Truth, and Life (which he is), then it is certain that "only one" thing is needed for a fulfilling, meaningful, and fruitful life: to stay as close to him as possible at all times.

Much more important than what we can do for Christ is what we can be for him, and what he can be for us. Martha was doing all kinds of tasks, and that was good. But Mary was listening to him, letting him serve her, being his close, intimate friend, and that was even better, "the better part".

Friendship with Christ is the one thing needed. Therefore, our task here on earth is to make a conscious choice to shape our lives accordingly, to keep Christ first, to live from his love and for his love. Jesus doesn't congratulate Mary because she won the spiritual lottery or had received a particularly beautiful soul from God.

He praises her because she has "chosen the better part." She *chooses* it. She chooses to submit to the Lord, to let him be for her what he in truth already is for everyone — the one thing needed.

Martha, on the other hand, has a divided heart. She loves Christ, but she still depends on her own strength to earn his love in return. She hasn't learned that what matters is not so much what we can do for Christ as what he has done and wants to do for us.

Jesus kindly teaches her in this encounter that the greatest thing she can do for him, the "one thing needed", is to let him rule completely over her heart, to take her place at his feet and listen to his words.

FIRST MEDITATION

Christ's Point of View

Let's try to see this scene from Christ's perspective.

From this passage and other New Testament passages, we know that Jesus loved both Martha and Mary. They were close friends who knew him well enough to invite him to dinner. Some biblical commentators claim that they were relatives of his. Martha was so comfortable with him that she didn't think twice about involving him in her family squabble.

The atmosphere is casual, friendly, almost like a barbecue. Martha is doing all the work, and Mary is just sitting at Christ's feet listening to him converse with the Apostles.

It's understandable that Martha would get perturbed. Feeding 15 people is no small task, and she could have used her sister's help. So she tries to get Jesus to tell Mary to lend a hand — a reasonable request. But Jesus doesn't. He actually commends Mary and reproves Martha. Why?

Christ was glad to be served, but what he really desires is simply to be loved. He yearns for our hearts. He is much less interested in our résumé of achievements (Martha probably had a great résumé) than in the love with which we achieved them — because he knows that we weren't created to achieve, but to love.

He was happy that Mary wanted to listen to him, wanted to sit beside him and spend time with him. Martha, on the other hand, had lost focus; she had allowed her heart to be divided by vanity, by a tinge of self-centeredness. How do we know this? Because she was upset.

If she had been working out of simple love, she would have been glad to let her sister enjoy Christ's conversation, even if it meant that dinner wouldn't be quite as perfect as she wanted. She may have even delayed preparing dinner so she could join the group in the living room. But Martha has become so preoccupied with getting everything done just right, just the way she wants it, that she has temporarily forgotten why it's worth doing in the first place.

So when she complains, Jesus seizes the opportunity to remind her of what's really important: not activities and achievements, even really good ones, but the relationship that should be at the heart of those activities and achievements.

FIRST MEDITATION

Jesus First

We know that Jesus Christ truly is the one Lord of life and history; the one Savior, the one Way, Truth, and Life, as he himself explained during the Last Supper (John 14:6).

We know, as St. Peter explained on Pentecost, that

> *There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved.*
>
> – Acts 4:12

And since that is true, we also know that the "one thing needed" for us to live the most meaningful, fulfilling, and fruitful lives possible is simply to stay as close to him as we can at all times.

This is the lesson Jesus wants to teach Martha when she comes to him to complain about her sister Mary. Martha was "burdened with serving," she was "anxious and worried about many things" — all the tasks that go with preparing a good meal for honored and unexpected guests.

We can all certainly relate to that. We have all been "anxious and worried" about many things from time to time. And Jesus doesn't say that that's a bad thing. He appreciates our efforts to do good in his name, to do worthy things for him and for those he loves.

And yet, much more important than what we can *do* for Christ is what we can *be* for him, and what he can be for us. Mary, Martha's sister, was sitting at the Lord's feet, "listening to him speak." She was letting him serve her. She was being his close, intimate friend. She was letting him set the agenda for her activity, and that was even better than what Martha was doing.

Jesus calls it, in fact, "the better part." This friendship with Jesus Christ, this putting his presence and his Word first, this "better part" — that is "the one thing needed."

FIRST MEDITATION

Argument from Experience

One of the most famous martyrs in the history of the Church gave a memorable testimony to this truth.

His name was St. Polycarp, and he was the bishop of Smyrna (in modern day Turkey) in the early second century. During one of the many waves of persecution that rocked the first centuries of Christianity, Polycarp was arrested and brought to trial before the local governor.

He was already an old man, but still an active and revered bishop. It was around the year 166 AD. The governor ordered him to renounce his faith in Christ, to blaspheme Jesus. (The Roman authorities at the time persecuted the Christians not because they committed crimes, but because they refused to worship the Roman gods.)

Polycarp answered:

> *I have served Christ these fourscore and six years, and he never did me any harm, but much good; and how can I blaspheme my King and my Savior? …Hear my free confession: I am a Christian.*

As a result of this profession of faith, Polycarp was sentenced to public execution by being burned alive at the stake. The flames failed to damage him. Eye witnesses say that the flames rose to a great height, surrounding him like a transparent circular wall in the middle of the stadium. He seemed to glow with a golden light, but remained unharmed. Finally, the guards had to kill him with the thrust of a spear.

Polycarp's answer to the governor shows that he knew all about "the one thing needed." For him, Christ was a faithful friend who had never abandoned him in his 86 years of life. That friendship was what gave his life meaning — not fame, not power, not pleasure, not even his achievements and ministry.

It was friendship with Jesus that was the one thing needed, and so he refused to betray that friendship, even if it meant public humiliation, torture, being separated from his people, and giving up everything else.

FIRST MEDITATION

Supernatural Benefits

Keeping our relationship with God as our highest priority enables us to live supernaturally. It gives God room to do things in our lives that, by our natural powers alone, we could never do — like keeping our hearts calm even when life burdens us with many cares and anxieties.

Imagine if Martha and Mary had been present when Jesus multiplied the loaves and fish. Martha would have despaired of being able to feed thousands of people with just a few loaves of bread and fish.

But Mary would have encouraged her to put those small, natural resources into the Lord's hands, so that he could work wonders. Even if our activities and achievements seem as small as a mustard seed, God can make them grow into the "largest of plants… and the birds of the sky come to dwell in its branches" (Matthew 13:32).

FIRST MEDITATION

Conclusion: The Daily Choice

Every day we are faced with the choice to be more like Martha or more like Mary. This is one of the most amazing things about Christianity. God respects our freedom so much that, in a sense, he leaves our destiny in our own hands.

We can freely choose our priorities in life. We can make our own achievements our highest priority, like Martha was doing, or we can make knowing, loving, and imitating Christ our highest priority.

Christ offers the benefits of following him to all people, but he leaves each person supremely free to accept or reject them. And the offer is not a one-time affair.

Martha chose to busy herself with her own plans on this occasion, but you can bet she adjusted her behavior the next time. Mary chose to listen to the Lord this time, but he wouldn't force her to do so again the next time. Every single time we choose to give Christ and his will top priority, we allow his sanctifying, healing grace to seep deeper into our lives.

Right now, we have chosen to be here listening to the Lord. What will we choose tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after? Jesus is hoping that we will continue to choose this better part, this one thing needed, each and every day. As Pope Benedict XVI put it in a speech he gave during his visit to the United States of America in 2008:

People today need to be reminded of the ultimate purpose of their lives. They need to recognize that implanted within them is a deep thirst for God. They need to be given opportunities to drink from the wells of his infinite love. It is easy to be entranced by the almost unlimited possibilities that science and technology place before us; it is easy to make the mistake of thinking we can obtain by our own efforts the fulfillment of our deepest needs. This is an illusion. Without God, who alone bestows upon us what we by ourselves cannot attain, our lives are ultimately empty. People need to be constantly reminded to cultivate a relationship with him who came that we might have life in abundance (cf. Jn 10:10).

– Benedict XVI
Meeting with bishops, Washington, DC, 16 April 2008

Take a few minutes now to thank God, in the silence of your heart, for teaching us this all-important truth — that our relationship with him really is the one thing needed.

Speak to him about that — speak from the sincerity of your heart, just as Martha did. And then listen with your heart - just as Mary did - to whatever he has to say in response. The following questions and biblical passages may help your meditation.

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

1. What types of situations tend to make me "anxious and worried about many things," like Martha? How do I usually respond to them?

2. Mary "sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak." What would it look like for me to do that in my life, without shirking my God-given duties and responsibilities?

3. What things in my life tend to try and usurp Jesus' place as the "one thing needed" to make my life happier? Talk to Jesus about those things, and ask him to help you see them as he sees them.

Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation

[But] whatever gains I had, these I have come to consider a loss because of Christ. More than that, I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having any righteousness of my own based on the law but that which comes through faith in Christ.

– Philippians 3:7-9, NABR

One thing I ask of the LORD; this I seek: To dwell in the LORD's house all the days of my life, to gaze on the LORD's beauty, to visit his temple. For God will hide me in his shelter in time of trouble; He will conceal me in the cover of his tent; and set me high upon a rock. Even now my head is held high above my enemies on every side! I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and chant praise to the LORD.

–Psalm 27:4-6, NABR

To the angel of the church in Ephesus, write this: The one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks in the midst of the seven gold lampstands says this: "I know your works, your labor, and your endurance, and that you cannot tolerate the wicked; you have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and discovered that they are impostors. Moreover, you have endurance and have suffered for my name, and you have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: you have lost the love you had at first. Realize how far you have fallen. Repent, and do the works you did at first…

– Revelation 2:1-5, NABR

SECOND MEDITATION

Only Grace Gives Lasting Value to Our Actions

It's possible to get a bit frustrated with this passage about Martha and Mary. We tend to identify with Martha more than with Mary. Most of us, I imagine, would very much like to have enough leisure time to be able to just sit at the Lord's feet and listen to him speak, like Mary. But who has the luxury of being able to sit and pray all day long?

We, like Martha, have households to run, jobs to do, responsibilities to fulfill, work that simply can't wait. And after all, both Martha and Mary are saints, so do I really need to worry about choosing the better part anyway?

Blessed Cardinal Newman, the famous 19th century British Scholar who caused widespread public scandal in England by converting to Catholicism, once gave a sermon on this passage from Luke's Gospel.

He observed that there are certain periods or conditions in life that lend themselves to a more Mary-like existence. Children, before they are burdened with weighty responsibilities, can simply enjoy the presence of the Lord, he argued in the sermon. The elderly, having spent their lives in active service of the Lord, can enjoy the quiet of contemplation. Likewise those who are unmarried or infirm.

This point of view would seem to ease our frustration a bit, letting us off the hook, so to speak, unless we find ourselves in one of those conditions. But I wonder if we may be letting ourselves off the hook a little too soon. We can't deny that, as Cardinal Newman points out, certain seasons or conditions of life lend themselves to a less externally active way of serving God. But even the more contemplative states of life, as long as we are still residents of this fallen world, involve effort and work: chores, and ministry, and serving one's neighbor, and suffering, and fighting temptation, and the battle of prayer — no one is exempt from these taxing activities.

Pope Benedict XVI pointed this out, indirectly, when he renounced the papacy in the winter of 2013. In his final Angelus address (25 February 2013), he explained that

The Lord is calling me to "scale the mountain," to dedicate myself still more to prayer and to meditation.

But then he went on to say that this new season wouldn't be less spiritually active. He explained:

But this does not mean abandoning the Church — on the contrary, if God asks this of me, it is to serve the Church with the same dedication and the same love with which I have tried to do so hitherto, but in a way that is more adapted to my age and my strength.

In other words, whether our state in life is externally more like Martha's or more like Mary's, what really matters, for our good and for God's glory, is what goes on internally — the level of our "dedication and love."

What Jesus calls the "one thing needed" is always just that: the one thing needed, no matter the circumstances of life.

SECOND MEDITATION

The Vine and the Branches

Jesus made this same point during the Last Supper, when he told his Apostles the parable of the vine and the branches. He knew that he was sending them on a challenging mission, a life full of much service and many cares — a life like Martha's.

And yet, with this parable of the vine and the branches, he reminds them they will have to keep choosing Mary's part, the better part, even in the midst of their missionary activity. He said:

> *Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing.*
>
> – John 15:4-5

In his encounter with Mary and Martha, Jesus is teaching us all the same lesson. As Christians, everything we do should flow out of our relationship with God. That is how our lives will bear the fruit of meaning, happiness, and goodness that we desire and that this world needs so desperately.

That is also how we will avoid falling into the trap Martha fell into — of allowing our many activities and responsibilities to choke our spirits, so that we become anxious and worried, frustrated and stressed, angry and judgmental.

Jesus isn't saying that we shouldn't do things, serve others, work hard, put our talents and skills to good use, and honor our commitments.

No, Jesus doesn't reprimand Martha for her activity. He reprimands her for being "worried and anxious" about all those activities. She has become so caught up in getting things done, that she has lost sight of why she is doing them.

She is like a branch desperately trying to bear fruit by its own power. The result is predictable frustration, anger, impatience, losing her temper.

Unless we stay plugged into Christ and his grace, unless we daily feed our souls with his words, unless everything we do flows out of our friendship with him - the one thing needed — none of our actions, even the good ones, can have lasting value.

And only lives of lasting value will give true peace to our hearts. If we begin and end everything we do at the feet of Jesus, in a loving conversation with him, we will never end up being irresponsible or lazy or spaced out — we will be more focused, and effective, and fruitful than ever: the one thing needed will always make everything else fall into its proper place.

SECOND MEDITATION

Images of Frustration

Most of us have probably had the experience of typing away on the computer, and then when you press enter, something goes wrong. The screen goes blank, and you lose all your work. Living life without keeping Christ first is just like that — at the end, when we click enter, when we face the last judgment, nothing that we did will matter, because it wasn't done out of love. We weren't online with Christ's friendship while we were doing it.

You may have had the experience of talking away on a cell phone, making your point, and then you finish, and there is no response on the other end. Somehow, in the middle of your conversation, the connection dropped, and nothing you said registered. When we try to make progress in life without depending on Christ, it's like talking into a cell phone that just dropped its connection: a lot of noise, but no lasting communication.

We have all probably had the experience of riding a bike when the chain comes loose. You pedal harder and faster, but you can't make any progress. All of your effort is being expended without moving the bike forward, because the chain is broken. Our friendship with Christ is the chain. Without it, we can pedal hard and work up a sweat in life, but we don't achieve our real purpose: a deeper and deeper communion with God.

In the past, prisoners of war were sometimes forced to dig huge holes. They would work fourteen hour days under close supervision. Then, when the holes were finally dug, they would be ordered to start filling them in again. This is what life is like when we don't keep Christ first, when we don't choose the better part, when we lack the one thing needed.

No matter how much activity we engage in, none of it really matters. A branch cut off from the vine simply can't bear fruit.

SECOND MEDITATION

St. Phillip Neri's Conversation-Stopper

St. Phillip Neri learned this lesson well. His holiness and good humor made him the most sought-after priest in the city of Rome during the mid-1500s. He was an adviser to popes and cardinals, kings and dukes, and also to beggars and bakers. Universally loved and respected, he reformed a corrupt city almost single-handedly.

The story goes that one day a young man came to him after finishing his bar exam. After years of study, the young man had finally made the grade, and was about to begin a promising career in the law. He was also courting an attractive, popular young lady. He was positively beaming with enthusiasm as he described his optimistic plans: first he would take a respectable job as a legal clerk, then he would marry his girl.

St. Phillip asked him one question. He said, "And then?"· So the young man continued, explaining how he would climb the ladder of success and raise a family. St. Phillip asked him another question. He said: "And then?" At that, the young man frowned and thought for a moment. Then he started stammering about becoming a famous judge and having grandchildren, but his enthusiasm seemed to be waning.

St. Phillip smiled, peered into his eyes, and asked him another question. He said: "And then?" The young man looked at the saint with panic and confusion - he had never really thought that far ahead. He slowly walked away to think things over — to sit for awhile at Christ's feet and ask him what the Lord wanted him to do. The next day he joined St. Philip's oratory, and eventually he became a holy, fruitful priest.

Not all of us are called to the priesthood or consecrated life, but all of us are called to keep Christ first, to live our lives under his wise and loving lordship, not just according to whim or fashion. After all, God has revealed to us that at some point, the "one thing needed" will be the only thing left.

SECOND MEDITATION

Conclusion: A Bit Too Scrawny?

Most of us are probably already united to the vine — or at least we want to be. That's why we're here right now. But it is possible to be a scrawny branch, a branch with only a little sap flowing through it. If we want our lives to bear more fruit, we need a lot of sap; we need to be healthy branches fully united to the vine. This is "the one thing needed."

In the conference, we will take a closer look at one very practical way to deepen our connection to the vine. But for now, take a few minutes to reflect once again on this encounter between Jesus, Martha, and Mary. Put yourself into the scene. Watch how Jesus treats his two close friends; hear his tone of voice as he converses with them. And then watch as he turns his loving gaze towards you and says… something that he really wants to tell you.

The following questions and Bible verses may help your meditation.

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

1. The YOUCAT (Youth Catechism #89) says: "The 'kingdom of God' begins in those who allow themselves to be transformed by God's love." What do I think that means (put it in my own words), and how does it apply to my life?

2. Imagine that a couple of news reporters were to follow me around for a week, just observing my choices and behavior without actually speaking to me. What would they conclude is the "one thing needed" in my life?

3 In his general audience on January 16th, 2013, Pope Benedict XVI made the following statement. Read it over prayerfully, and try to apply it to your own life:

> *The important thing is that we follow Christ not only when we are in need and when we find space for it in our daily affairs, but with our lives as such. The whole of life should be directed towards encountering Him, towards loving Him; and, in it, a central place must also be given to the love of one's neighbor, that love that, in the light of the Crucified One, enables us to recognize the face of Jesus in the poor, the weak, the suffering. This is only possible if the true face of Jesus has become familiar to us in listening to His Word, in interior dialogue, in entering into this Word in such a way as to really encounter him, and, naturally, in the Mystery of the Eucharist.*

Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation

> *Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.*
>
> – 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, NABR

> *If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Think of what is above, not of what is on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory.*
>
> – Colossians 3:1-4, NABR

> *Therefore, that I might not become too elated, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.*
>
> – 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, NABR

> *Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Amen, I say to you, it will be hard for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and said, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For human beings this is impossible, but for God all things are possible." Then Peter said to him in reply, "We have given up everything and followed you. What will there be for us?" Jesus said to them, "Amen, I say to you that you who have followed me, in the new age, when the Son of Man is seated on his throne of glory, will yourselves sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for the sake of my name will receive a hundred times more, and will inherit eternal life."*
>
> – Matthew 19:23-29, NABR

CONFERENCE

Keeping Christ First

So, how can we keep Christ first in our lives? How can we be busy doing all that God wants us to be doing, without getting troubled and anxious, like Martha, and forgetting why we are doing all those things?

The short answer to that question is simply this: we have to give our relationship with God the time it needs and deserves. But that's not easy to do. Time is one of those things we never seem to have enough of. We know we should spend time in personal prayer each day. We know we should go on a good, solid spiritual retreat or pilgrimage each year. We know we should take time to savor and explore the liturgical seasons and feasts month by month. But how?

The closest thing to a secret formula goes way back to Moses and the Ten Commandments. The first three of those Commandments were designed to help God's people keep God first in their lives.

The Third Commandment — the one having to do with keeping the Lord's Day holy — is all about allowing God to sanctify our time. God invented time, so no one knows its ins and outs better than he does. In the Third Commandment, he presents us with the divine secret for successful, Christ-centered time management, and he presents it not as a recommendation, but as a command: he knows we need it.

Living the Lord's Day well changes the rhythm of our daily lives, so that we can more easily avoid being frazzled and stressed, like Martha. Living the Lord's Day well creates a healthy space in our busy lives, so that all of our activities can be harmoniously integrated into a beautiful whole — just like the vast empty interiors of the great cathedrals allow their many magnificent architectural elements to contribute harmoniously to the inspiring whole.

Before we look at how to fulfill this commandment, however, we need to ask ourselves a question: How willing am I to really trust God on this one? No matter how odd this Commandment may seem, no matter how inconvenient, no matter how counter-cultural or even distasteful, am I willing to take the risk of really following it?

If not, you may as well skip the rest of the conference. But if you are: let's get to it. And, as usual, we can turn to the Catechism for guidance.

The Catechism identifies the four things that should make our Sundays different:

On Sundays and other holy days of obligation, the faithful are to refrain from engaging in work or activities that hinder the worship owed to God, the joy proper to the Lord's Day, the performance of the works of mercy, and the appropriate relaxation of mind and body.

– CCC 2185

Worship, joy, mercy, and rest — these are the ingredients of a healthy Lord's Day, the elements that will make Sundays different from other days, and we need to guard against anything that could interfere with them. Let's take a look at each of them, one by one.

CONFERENCE

Worship

The first ingredient in a healthy Lord's Day is worship. One of the things that separate human beings from animals is our capacity for worship, for acknowledging our dependence on God, and for giving thanks to him for creating and redeeming us.

Worship flows naturally from the human mind's spiritual awareness that we are part of a story that goes beyond the limits of time and space, a story that involves a transcendent, divine dimension.

This awareness, in fact, is one of the clues that scientists use to determine whether ancient remains belong to human beings or pre-human beings. We don't find animals burying their dead, for example, and including artifacts in the graves. That kind of activity signifies the uniquely human awareness of a transcendent realm, a mysterious divine realm that governs the visible universe, and that we depend on.

The earliest human cultures that we know of all had religious beliefs and practices. Religious worship, in fact, is a necessary part of who we are as created, spiritual beings. Here's how the Catechism puts it:

Man is by nature and vocation a religious being. Coming from God, going toward God, man lives a fully human life only if he freely lives by his bond with God.

– CCC 44

The commandment to keep holy the Lord's Day, to celebrate God's goodness and our covenant with him on that day, flows from this reality. Here's how the Catechism explains it:

The celebration of Sunday observes the moral commandment inscribed by nature in the human heart to render to God an outward, visible, public, and regular worship "as a sign of his universal beneficence to all."

– CCC 2176

Throughout human history, people have desperately tried to find the right way to live this natural need and duty of worship. They have sacrificed animals, created complex rituals, and in some cases even developed ritual human sacrifice.

They have invented individual as well as group forms of worship. They have sought the perfect formula over, and over, and over again. As Christians, we are free from the daunting burden of trying to figure out all on our own the right way to worship God. God has shown it to us, and given it to us.

The sacrifice of the Mass, the celebration of the Eucharist, by which each and all of us are united to the self-offering of Jesus Christ, is the perfect prayer, the fulfillment of all human yearnings for proper worship. This is why the primary responsibility of every one of us on the Lord's Day is to participate, consciously, actively, prayerfully, in Mass.

Here's how the Catechism puts it:

> *The Sunday Eucharist is the foundation and confirmation of all Christian practice. For this reason the faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on days of obligation, unless excused for a serious reason (for example, illness, the care of infants) or dispensed by their own pastor. Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin.*
>
> – CCC 2181

A friend of mine from college contacted me a couple of years ago. He was Catholic, but he had gotten himself into some serious moral difficulties. We talked it through, for a couple of hours. We identified some steps he could take to get back on track, but we also identified one of the steps he took that got him off track.

His efforts to climb the ladder of success in his profession required him to work long hours. There was a period in which he was working 80-hour weeks on a regular basis, including weekends. During that period, he stopped going to Sunday Mass. He said he just couldn't fit it in anymore. At about the same period, his moral troubles began.

Our participation in Sunday Mass, so necessary for the proper living of the Lord's Day, is a good vital sign for the health of our spiritual life.

CONFERENCE

Joy

The second ingredient in a healthy Lord's Day is joy. When someone does something wonderful for us, the natural and proper response is to rejoice, to celebrate, to experience joy.

In the Old Testament, the Sabbath day was a day of joy because it was the day in which the Israelites commemorated the Creation of the universe, and also the Covenant. God had created the world, and then after the tragedy of original sin, he had chosen Israel, protected Israel, redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt — all those divine actions were reasons to rejoice.

In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit has led us to shift the Lord's Day from Saturday (the Israelites' "Sabbath") to Sunday — the day on which Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

Everything in the Old Testament was just a preparation for the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus was the true redeemer, the savior who has freed the fallen human race from slavery to sin and evil. Jesus has opened up the gates of heaven for us, the gates that Adam and Eve had closed through their rebellion against God. Jesus has paid the price for our selfishness and sin, so that we can have access to God's infinite mercy, to a fresh start whenever we need it. If that's not reason to rejoice, I don't know what is.

When we take time on Sundays to enjoy the good things God has done for us, to smile and laugh and take joy in God's gifts, including the good things of creation — when we do that, we are doing what is right and just; we are showing our faith and our hope in God.

The greatest joys of human experience come when we are together with people we love, and this is why Sunday has always been considered a day for families and friends to get together, simply to enjoy each other's company.

Different types of activities are enjoyable to different personalities, but when we have the desire to rejoice together, to enjoy what God has given and done for us, we will find a way to bring all our different personalities into harmony.

I remember a friend I had when I was growing up. His grandfather had done very well, going from rags to riches through hard work and a little bit of luck. He had built a beautiful family mansion, with large lawns, and a huge family room, and gorgeous living rooms.

But the grandfather had passed away, bequeathing his mansion to my friend's dad. I used to go over to my friend's house sometimes on the weekends. And we used to play together — but we had to stay pretty much in his room. We couldn't use the lawns, because we might dig them up. And we couldn't use the big family room because we might break something. And the living rooms? Don't even think about it!

What a shame! I am sure the grandfather who worked so hard to provide for his family would have been sad to know that his family was afraid to enjoy what he had worked so hard to give them. On Sundays, when we make time to live the simple joys that God has built into our human condition — family, friendship, good food, clean fun — we also give joy to the heart of God, our Father, who has made the universe for us.

CONFERENCE

Mercy

The third ingredient in a healthy Lord's Day is mercy. Here's how the Catechism puts it:

> *Sunday is traditionally consecrated by Christian piety to good works and humble service of the sick, the infirm, and the elderly. Christians will also sanctify Sunday by devoting time and care to their families and relatives, often difficult to do on other days of the week.*
>
> – CCC 2186

In the hustle and bustle of our Martha-like lives, it's often very hard to find time for the Christian works of mercy. Sometimes, all we seem to be able to do is make a monetary donation to a worthy cause — and that's a good thing. But it's also a good thing to reach out with our own hands to serve those who may be sick, imprisoned, or alone.

This is especially the case for our own family members and relatives, or to people close to our social circles who may have hidden needs. Giving these people something to look forward to on Sundays is a powerful way to help others experience the goodness of the God we worship and to spread to others the joy that we have received from the Lord.

When I first became a Christian, I was about 13-years-old. I had started going to a Bible church under the influence of my older sister. We couldn't drive ourselves, and every single Sunday we needed a ride.

One of the young men who belonged to the church and lived close to my house offered to pick us up and take us home. And he did that for almost two years. And every Sunday, after the service, he would make a special stop before taking us back to our house.

He would pull into a little strip mall and park right outside of Davis Bakery, and he would treat me and my sisters to donuts and Danishes and whatever else we wanted. It became a little tradition, and we used to look forward to it and to thoroughly enjoy it. It was the perfect finish to a morning at church.

He didn't have to do that — he didn't even have to give us a ride. It was the spirit of Christian mercy and love that inspired him to go the extra mile for a few youngsters who needed a hand. I would guess that his humble act of mercy did as much or more than all the sermons I heard in those years to help me get to know the heart of God.

CONFERENCE

Rest

The fourth ingredient in a healthy Lord's Day is rest. This may be the hardest ingredient for us to find in our high-strung and secular culture. Healthy rest and relaxation is difficult to come by in our age — we often prefer to just take a high-octane energy drink and keep on working.

And when we do indulge in some recreation, too often it is the kind of activity that wears us out even more, instead of actually refreshing us.

Basically, our culture has lost the natural rhythm of work and rest. The wisdom of living the Lord's Day can help us recover it. Here's how the Catechism puts it:

> *God's action is the model for human action. If God "rested and was refreshed" on the seventh day, man too ought to "rest" and should let others, especially the poor, "be refreshed." The Sabbath brings everyday work to a halt and provides a respite. It is a day of protest against the servitude of work and the worship of money.*
>
> – CCC 2172

That last phrase is important: by resting from normal work on the Lord's Day, we make a powerful statement against "the servitude of work and the worship of money."

Human beings work to live; we don't live to work. Too often we get caught up in the rat race and forget that. We become addicted to our own earthly projects and dreams, in a sense, and lose sight of the bigger picture, the picture that includes eternity and our final resting place with God in heaven.

We think we can build heaven on earth if we just work a little harder. That's a lie, and we need to break out of it. We need to remember that we have a homeland in heaven, a homeland that is not the fruit of our sweat and effort, but the gift of our loving God.

Our human dignity requires this. Human beings are created in God's image; we are God's children. God worked and then rested when he created the universe, and that sets the pattern for us as well.

Once again the Catechism makes this clear:

> *Just as God "rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done," human life has a rhythm of work and rest. The institution of the Lord's Day helps everyone enjoy adequate rest and leisure to cultivate their familial, cultural, social, and religious lives.*
>
> – CCC 2184

Squirrels don't take Sundays off. Neither do robots. But we are not animals, and we are not machines: we are human beings. Engaging in healthy and refreshing recreation on the Lord's Day helps us protect our true identity and keep the rest of our activities in proper balance and perspective.

It's possible to exaggerate this aspect of the Lord's Day, as the Pharisees did in the time of Jesus. They went so far as to prescribe the precise number of steps a person was allowed to take on the Sabbath, and the exact weight of loads that a person was allowed to carry.

But Jesus was wiser than the Pharisees, and he told them that man is not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath is made for man (cf. Mark 2:27) — and we need to remember that, too.

Sometimes, our secular society doesn't allow us to live Sundays as fully as we would like — but a lot of times, a little foresight and effort can really help us buck the secular system. But even so, sometimes we will just have to do some work on Sundays.

·Some people will have to work on Sundays in order to afford others opportunities for rest — and those people will have to find some other time for their necessary rest and relaxation. And something that might be work for one person could actually be a healthy form of recreation for another person. God understands all those permutations.

We don't need to find the perfect formula and the pristine definition of work and rest — but we do need to accept and fulfill this need that God has built into our human nature, and find ways to meet this need on Sundays.

I know a family that goes entirely offline every Sunday. Everybody turns off their computers and puts their cell phones in a basket. And they spend the day together, doing non-electronic things, things they just don't get to do during the week.

I know another family that goes to a state park every Sunday after Mass for a cookout and games; they usually bring other families along with them. Even just getting the whole family and some friends together for dinner on Sunday would be better than nothing — it would make Sundays different, seasoning them with joy and with rest.

And that's the point: God commands us to make Sundays different, and even if we can only start with little things, we need to make the effort to follow this sacred command.

CONFERENCE

Conclusion: Cooking the One Thing Needed

Worship, joy, mercy, and rest — these are the four ingredients that go into a healthy Lord's Day. And a healthy Lord's Day is God's not-so-secret formula, so to speak, for healthy time management, for keeping our hearts in the right place, so that we can avoid being upset and stressed and frazzled by the many worries and duties that clamor for our attention — as happened to Martha — and keep our hearts and minds focused on the one thing needed, like Mary.

Take some time now to reflect on the ten questions in the personal questionnaire. The Holy Spirit may use them to give you some new ideas about deepening your friendship with Christ, which in the end, is the only thing that really matters.

Personal Questionnaire

1. On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied am I with how I manage my time? What would have to change for my score to improve?

2. Try to remember an experience of the Lord's Day that was positive and in line with God's vision of the Third Commandment. Savor that experience and thank God for it.

3. How would society be different if everyone focused on God, family, mercy, and rest on Sundays?

4. How meaningful for me is my Sunday worship? What could I do to make it more meaningful?

5. In general, to what extent are my Sundays marked by Christian joy? What could I do to intensify this aspect of the Lord's Day?

6. In general, what gives me joy and why? Talk to God about those things, and about his desire to give you supernatural joy.

7. In general, what role do works of mercy play in how I live the Lord's Day?

8. How could I increase the role of mercy in my Sundays, without compromising the other three ingredients of a healthy Lord's Day?

9. On a scale of 1-10, how healthy is my weekly work-rest rhythm?

10. What types of activities help refresh my soul, mind, and body? How can I better combine these activities with the other ingredients of a healthy Lord's Day?

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:

- *The Better Part: A Christ-Centered Resource for Personal Prayer*
  by Fr. John Bartunek, LC
- *Time Management for Catholics: Make the Most of Every Second by Putting Christ First*
  by Dave Durand
- *Navigating the Interior Life*
  by Dan Burke
- *Dies Domini, Apostolic Letter*
  by Pope John Paul II
- *The Gift of Rest: Discovering the Beauty of the Sabbath*
  by Joseph Lieberman and David Klinghoffer

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