



# TROUBLED HEARTS

## A RETREAT GUIDE ON PEACE OF SOUL

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# INTRODUCTION

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## Retreat Overview

During the Last Supper, Jesus gave us his New Commandment: “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34, 15:12).

It was so important that he repeated it more than once during that sacred meal. We all know about that commandment, and we all know that it touches the core of our identity and mission as followers of Jesus Christ.

But he also said something else during the Last Supper, on the eve of his passion, death, and resurrection. Jesus also told his Apostles: “Do not let your hearts be troubled” (John 14:1, 14:27).

This admonition — which, in a certain sense, also sounds almost like a commandment — was also so important that he repeated it more than once during that sacred meal. And the second time he mentions it, he turns his attention to what should be in our hearts, instead of trouble: peace.

“Peace I leave with you,” he explains, “my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid” (John 14:27).

Isn't it strange that Jesus would admonish us, indeed almost command us, not to let our hearts be troubled?

He doesn't say, “Don't worry when your hearts are troubled,” or “Having a troubled heart is unavoidable sometimes, so don't sweat it.” No — he actually tells us: “*Do not let your hearts be troubled.*”

He knows that we live in a fallen world and are constantly struggling with confusion, disillusionment, rejection, sadness, and discouragement — all of are things that trouble our hearts.

And yet, he still tells us: “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” If he says this, it must be possible: *But how?*

That's what this Retreat Guide will explore.

- In the First Meditation, we will reflect on how St. Paul understands this teaching of our Lord.
- In the Second Meditation, we will watch and learn from how Jesus himself calms his own troubled heart in the Garden of Gethsemane.
- And in the Conference, we will reflect on why it is so hard for us to follow this instruction of the Lord.

Before we get started, take a few moments to thank God for this chance to spend time with him, and ask him for the grace you need to grow spiritually, to — as the 13th century saint, Richard of Chichester put it — know him more clearly, love him more dearly, and follow him more nearly.

# FIRST MEDITATION

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## A Core Value for St. Paul

For St. Paul, author of a large portion of the New Testament, peace is a core value of the Gospel. In fact, he begins every single one of his New Testament Letters by invoking the peace of God on those he is writing to.

He writes: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 1:7; cf 1 Corinthians 1:3, 2 Corinthians 1:2, Galatians 1:3, Ephesians 1:2, Philippians 1:2, Colossians 1:1, 1 Thessalonians 1:1, 2 Thessalonians 1:2, 1 Timothy 1:2, 2 Timothy 1:2, Titus 1:4, Philemon v3).

To greet someone by wishing them peace — the Hebrew word “Shalom” and the Greek word “Eirene” — was a common thing among Jews of St. Paul's time, but just because it was common does not imply it was meaningless.

In fact, we know for certain that St. Paul meant what he said — he wasn't just saying it because that's what everybody said at the beginning of letters. How do we know this? Because he always, in every single one of those Letters, links the word “peace” with the word “grace,” and that was *not* common.

And then he always goes on to specifically describe what kind of grace and peace he is invoking: the special, absolutely unique kind that comes only from “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Grace and peace, then, for St. Paul, are a summary of the entire Gospel.

Grace — the Greek word is “charis” — referred to the beautiful and absolutely unconditional love of God, which comes to us in Jesus as a saving gift. Grace, in other words, is salvation itself, the redemption from sin that God offers us freely in Christ. And in St. Paul's mind, that grace, that overflowing and redeeming love that God has for each one of us, is always linked to peace.

In the Old Testament tradition, peace — shalom — meant much more than simply the absence of turmoil. It also implied the presence of everything that would permit prosperity, growth, flourishing, blossoming, and fulfillment. It was the summary of all good things, all things that bring joy and meaning and happiness to the human heart.

That's what "peace" means in the Bible. And that peace, in the mind of St. Paul, is the direct result of grace. In other words, when we receive the gift of grace, it brings peace — wholeness, vitality, hope, joy, meaning — to our hearts. Grace is the soil of the Christian life, and peace is the fruit. This is why St. Paul begins every single one of his New Testament Letters by invoking God's grace and peace on his readers.

## FIRST MEDITATION

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### *A Core Value for Jesus*

St. Paul wasn't just making this up. Peace was a core value for him, because it was a core value for Jesus. One of the titles given to the promised Messiah in the Old Testament was, "Prince of Peace." And on the night of Christ's birth, when the host of angels appeared to the shepherds, what was their song? "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14). "Peace" and "favor," another way of saying, "grace and peace." And Jesus himself emphasized the peace he wants to give us, the interior fullness of meaning and purpose and joy that makes life truly worth living, over and over again.

He often ended his encounters with people whose faith obtained miracles of healing and forgiveness with the phrase: "Go in peace" (John 4:50, Luke 7:50, Mark 5:34).

When he gave instructions to his disciples about how they should spread the Gospel, he instructed them to begin their ministry by telling people, "Peace be with you." And after his Resurrection, when he appeared to his frightened, discouraged, and confused Apostles, he said to them, repeatedly, "Peace be with you" (John 20:19, 21, 26).

The peace that Jesus wants to give us was so central, in fact, that the Holy Spirit firmly embedded it right smack in the middle of the holiest moment in the life of the Church.

Every single time we celebrate Holy Communion, right before we come up to receive the Eucharist, we hear the priest remind us of this inheritance of peace that Jesus bestows on us, repeating the words Our Lord spoke at the Last Supper as he says:



*Lord Jesus Christ, who said to your Apostles: Peace I leave you, my peace I give you; look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church, and graciously grant her peace and unity in accordance with your will.*

And this is where we find the answer to our question: How is it that Jesus can command us to not let our hearts be troubled?

Only because with the gift of his grace — of his redeeming and transforming love, of his forgiveness, of his loving presence, with the gift, in short, of *himself* — he gives us everything we need to experience always and everywhere the peace of his eternal Kingdom.

He is the Prince of Peace; he is the Lord of life and history; his Kingdom will have no end. We can't keep our hearts from being troubled by leaning on our own strength and self-control, but we *can* conquer the trouble in our hearts by leaning on Jesus.

As St. Richard of Chichester put it, the more clearly we know him, the more dearly we love him, the more nearly we follow him, the more fully his peace will fill and overflow from our hearts.

## FIRST MEDITATION

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### *The "Ara Pacis"*

If you happened to be a tourist visiting Rome, and if you had a particularly good tour guide, you might take a short walk from your hotel to visit a little known but truly remarkable remnant of the ancient world, a monument that has a curious relevance for our meditation on Christ's peace.

This marble monument is known as the "Ara Pacis Augustae", the "Altar of Augustine's Peace." It was erected by the Roman Senate in 9 BC in honor of Augustus Caesar, immediately after the end of the wars in Gaul and Spain. It was a symbol of the famed "Pax Romana", the "Roman Peace."

The Pax Romana was an achievement unmatched before or since: a state of world order in which the entire Mediterranean basin, the entire western world at the time, was experiencing universal peace and prosperity. War had been banished, poverty and chaos had been overcome, and everyone attributed it to the great work of Augustus Caesar.

For this they began to call him “Salvator Mundi”, the “Savior of the World”, and “Filius Dei”, the “Son of God”. And once a year, on the *Ara Pacis*, this altar of peace, Rome’s High Priest presided over a colossal procession and liturgy centered on a sacrifice offered in order to perpetuate this universal peace and prosperity.

The marble altar itself is located at the top of a marble staircase and surrounded by a roofless enclosure with elaborate marble sculptures. If you were a tourist visiting this site, the tour guide would certainly point out that these sculptures include artistic motifs that dominated art in the Roman Empire for centuries afterwards.

Take for instance the ubiquitous vines and interwoven plants — these powerfully symbolized the peace and prosperity of the Pax Romana, to the perpetuation of which this altar bore its yearly sacrifice.

Or take as another example the wreaths that decorate the figures and the marble facing itself — these signified the victory that Augustan had won over all of Rome’s enemies, and the everlasting nature of that victory. Then there are the figures themselves, the scenes sculpted into the marble enclosure.

In them we see depicted both the pagan liturgical procession — like a triumphal parade showcasing the spoils of war and the fruits of peace — and the pagan sacrifice, and also Augustan himself and his achievements which led to the Universal Peace of the “Pax Romana.”

Even the shape of the monument has deep symbolic meaning. It is a block, open to the air and to its surroundings, unlike the typical pagan temples of the time, which led their worshippers through a maze of imposing columns into a dark, mysterious cavern where the deity dwelt. Here there is no separation between the earthly and heavenly realms.

Why the difference? At the time, the ancient Romans believed that with Augustus the reign of divine peace had finally come to earth — no more fear and confusion, no more darkness and cowering: all light, openness, hope, completion. All of that you would see and learn, if you were a tourist in Rome.

But if you were a *pilgrim* in Rome, and you visited this ancient monument, you would see much, much more. You would see a cosmic, providential irony.

Because Augustus was not the “Savior of the World,” nor the “Son of God.” And the Pax Romana was not the universal and everlasting peace and prosperity — the Roman Empire came crashing down, as all earthly empires eventually do.

Yet, 5 years after the *Ara Pacis* was dedicated, the true Savior of the World and Son of God *DID* come to earth. His name was Jesus Christ; and he *DID* establish his Kingdom of everlasting peace and prosperity. It is a Kingdom that Jesus planted here on earth like a mustard seed (cf. Matthew 13:31-32) with the foundation of the Catholic Church, and it is a Kingdom that will continue growing until it reaches its fullness in eternity.

This Kingdom has been giving the world hope, light, forgiveness, and the healing power of an uninterrupted flow of saints for twenty centuries, while earthly kingdoms like the Roman Empire continue to rise and fall, to come and go.

So the pagan world erected an altar to the coming of a Savior they did not yet know, at the very time when that Savior was coming into the world. And the irony continues. It was this style of art that the first Christians in Rome knew and loved. And so these very symbols and motifs, the very ones used to express a *vain* hope in the Pax Romana, were adopted and baptized by the first Christians to express their *true* hope.

They took the vines and wreaths and interwoven plants and inserted them into the mosaics that adorn the earliest basilicas. They carved the triumphal procession and the scenes of victory into their tombstones, the pillars of the churches, and their altars, where the true sacrifice was offered.

They decorated their shrines with scenes of liturgical processions honoring saints and depicting the definitive Christian victory over the sinful world. And when the time came for Christians to erect their first public places of worship, they too disdained the closed, intimidating, dark, foreboding forms of ancient temples, and created spaces filled with light and hope and glory and revelation and the presence of a living God.

The ancient pagans understood the value of peace, and longed for it, and recognized that true, lasting peace could only come from a divine source. The *Ara Pacis* was their expression of this longing. But the altar in your parish church, where Jesus comes down from heaven at every Mass, and the altar of your heart, where he comes to reign every time you receive the Eucharist, is the place of its true fulfillment.

## FIRST MEDITATION

### *Conclusion & Further Reflection*

Peace is a core value for St. Paul and for Jesus — and Jesus can command us not to let our hearts be troubled precisely because he truly is the Savior of the World and the Son of God — the everlasting Prince of Peace.

He wants us to experience the interior peace that comes from receiving the gift of his grace. He wants us to experience it more, and more, and more, until we learn how to “not let our hearts be troubled.” Take some time now to thank God for his gifts of grace and peace, and to stir up your desire to receive more fully these gifts, and to let God’s love calm the troubles of your heart.

The following questions and Bible verses may help your meditation:

### *Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion*

- 1 When have I experienced God’s peace in my soul most profoundly? Remember what it felt like and thank God for that gift.
- 2 How deeply do I desire to live this peace of Christ more fully and more constantly?

- 3 Would I say that, in my mind, Christ’s peace occupies as central a place as it did in the writings of St. Paul? Why or why not?
- 4 How much does my devotion to the Eucharist, expressed especially through adoration and Holy Communion, help bring peace to my heart?

### *Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation*



*For the kingdom of God is not a matter of food and drink, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

– Romans 14:17



*In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*

– Galatians 5:22-23



*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace... He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.*

– Ephesians 4:13-14, 17-18



*Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful.*

– Colossians 3:12-15



*But the wisdom from above is first of all pure, then peaceable, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without inconstancy or insincerity. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace for those who cultivate peace.*

– James 3:17-18



*The LORD bless you and keep you! The LORD let his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you! The LORD look upon you kindly and give you peace!*

– Numbers 6:24-26



*Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.*

– Psalm 34:15

## SECOND MEDITATION

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*Does Jesus Contradict Himself?*

As we have seen, during the Last Supper Jesus admonishes his followers: “Do not let your hearts be troubled” (John 14:1). A few hours later, when he and those same followers are praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Gospel writers tell us that Jesus:



*...took along Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to feel sorrow and distress. Then he said to them, ‘My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch with me.’*

– Matthew 26:37-38

His experience of sorrow and distress was so intense, St. Luke tells us, that he was “in such agony” that “his sweat became like great drops of blood falling on the ground” (Luke 22:44).

Do you think it is fair to say that Jesus’ heart was troubled as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that night? Absolutely. In fact, right before his passion began, Jesus described his interior experience like this: “I am troubled now” (John 12:27). Is Our Lord contradicting himself?

He tell us that we should not let our hearts be troubled, and then he shows us clearly that even he himself, the Lord, experiences turbulence and trouble in his heart.

How can this be? If Jesus himself cannot follow his own advice, how can we? It seems like we are faced with a terrible dilemma. But in fact, we are not.

When Jesus tells us not to let our hearts be troubled, notice what he is really saying. He is saying that our hearts will naturally tend towards being troubled, and when that happens, we need to keep them at peace.

It’s like a soccer coach telling his defense that they shouldn’t let the opposing players get behind them. The opposing players are constantly trying to do just that, and so it will take constant attention and effort to make sure it doesn’t happen. That’s how we should understand this admonition of our Lord, and that’s how he explains it during the Last Supper.

Towards the end of that sacred meal, right before they all go off to the Garden of Gethsemane, he tells his Apostles:



*I have told you this so that you might have peace in me. In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world.*

– John 16:33

He contrasts two things:

- First, the troubled and troubling circumstances that will always swirl around us and within us in this fallen world;
- Second, the peace that he wants us to have, and that we can though him and with him, in spite of those stormy circumstances.

It is no coincidence that Jesus’ agony in the Garden of Gethsemane follows immediately after this discourse of the Last Supper. After telling his followers that they should not let their hearts be troubled, he shows them how to do that. Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, reveals by his own example how we can learn to live always and everywhere in his peace. In fact, he gives us three practical tools that can help us cultivate and spread his peace in our hearts.

## SECOND MEDITATION

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*The First Tool: Repentance*

The first tool Jesus gives us for cultivating Christ-centered peace of soul is repentance from sin. This goes to the root of some of our deepest interior sorrows and troubles. Jesus himself never had to repent from sin — he never sinned. But in throughout his passion, he reveals the effect that our sin has on us: it tears us apart.

## SECOND MEDITATION

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### *The Second Tool: Prayer*

The second tool that Jesus gives us for calming our troubled hearts is prayer.

What did Jesus do when he found his heart being troubled? How did he deal with that? How did he fight to regain interior peace in the midst of his turmoil, suffering, and pain? He prayed.

He went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray in the midst of his suffering, and, the Gospels tell us, his prayer brought him light, strength, and consolation. You and I don't always find interior peace right away when we look for it in prayer — sometimes, in fact, our prayer itself is a battle, especially when we find that God's will doesn't agree with our natural preferences.

But Jesus is teaching us that if we persevere in prayer, and if we develop — day by day — a truly mature *life* of prayer, this will help us experience his peace in our hearts.

St. Luke has a truly amazing line in his description of this scene. He writes in Chapter 22, verse 44: "He [Jesus] was in such agony and he prayed so fervently..."

As Jesus' suffering intensified, so did his prayer. And in the same passage, in verse 40, Jesus tells his followers to do the same thing: "Pray," he says to the disciples, "that you may not undergo the test."

Jesus' first reaction to the stirring up of trouble in his heart is prayer — and we must learn to make that our first reaction too.

St. Paul learned this lesson, and he taught it to his fellow Christians in Philippi with one of the greatest passages in all his Letters (Philippians 4:6-7):



*Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*

Prayer, turning to God whenever we feel our hearts threatened with worry, fear, anger, anxiety, or any other trouble - that's the second tool Jesus gives us in the Garden of Gethsemane to help us cultivate interior peace.

Why is Jesus suffering so much, so intensely, in the Garden of Gethsemane, and throughout the rest of his passion? The Church makes it very clear: Jesus was suffering for our sins.

The Catechism puts it like this:



*...sinners [that's us] were the authors and the ministers of all the sufferings that the divine Redeemer endured*

– CCC 598

Jesus, in other words, was taking upon himself, absorbing into his own sinless soul, the horrible evil of our sins.

To quote the Catechism again:



*Jesus did not experience reprobation as if he himself had sinned. But in the redeeming love that always united him to the Father, he assumed us in the state of our waywardness of sin, to the point that he could say in our name from the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'*

– CCC 603

By doing this, Jesus voluntarily offered himself as a sacrifice of atonement — he suffered the consequences of our sins, consequences that he did not deserve to suffer. And his agony, his distress, his sorrow unto death — those are the reactions of his perfectly loving and righteous soul being inundated, in a sense, with our sins.

That is what sin does to our souls — it tears them apart; it violates them; it scourges and crucifies them, just as it did to Christ himself during his passion.

And so, whenever we sin, we create turbulence and disharmony and trouble in our souls. We damage, disturb, or even destroy our own peace of soul.

There is no room for true interior peace inside a guilty conscience. And so, by repenting of our sins — and that means taking responsibility for them, confessing them, receiving God's merciful forgiveness, and doing penance for them — we remove the biggest obstacle there is to interior peace.

So that's the first tool for cultivating Christ's peace in our hearts that Jesus gives us in the Garden of Gethsemane: repentance.



And of course we will be much better at using this tool in crisis-times if we have formed a healthy habit of prayer during *non*-crisis-times.

## SECOND MEDITATION

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### *The Third Tool: Prayer*

The third tool Jesus gives us for cultivating his peace in our hearts is turning our attention to God — thinking about God and God’s will instead of getting stuck in our difficulties.

When trouble is knocking at the door of our hearts, we have a natural tendency to focus our attention on it. We are like St. Peter in the famous Gospel passage when he walked on water on the Sea of Galilee.

He was going along fine until he noticed just how stormy the storm was. As soon as he took his eyes off of Jesus and turned them onto the waves and the clouds and the storm, he began to sink (cf. Matthew 14:25-33).

Jesus followed a different mental itinerary in the Garden of Gethsemane. He felt the storm crash over his soul, and he knelt down in prayer.

And in his prayer, he first acknowledged his own trepidation and fear; he didn’t deny it or ignore it — this is when he says, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me” (Luke 22:42).

But he didn’t stop there. As terrible as the storm was, he turned his attention away from the wind and the waves, and put it on his Father in Heaven, on God’s will. He continued his prayer by saying: “still, not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42).

In the midst of our interior battles, it is not easy to do this, to turn our attention away from the source of the turbulence and put it on God, God’s goodness, God’s love, God’s wisdom.

It wasn’t easy for Jesus to do — St. Matthew explains that Jesus kept repeating this back-and-forth prayer over an extended period of time.

St. Matthew writes: “He... withdrew again and prayed a third time, saying the same thing again...” (Matthew 26:45).

St. Augustine has a theory that during this prayer in Gethsemane, Jesus actually recited, prayerfully, Psalm 119 as a way to keep his mind focused on his Father’s will: Psalm 119 is the longest of the 150 Psalms and it is an extended meditation on the power, the goodness, and the wisdom of God’s will.

It is a hard battle to stay focused on God when we feel our hearts besieged, but it is possible. Jesus did it, and with his help, we can do it too.

But we have to form the habit, and that means being proactive and intentional in what we think about and pay attention to even when we aren’t in the midst of a storm.

This too St. Paul emphasized in his Letter to the Christians in Philippi (Philippians 4:8-9):



*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me. Then the God of peace will be with you.*

Developing the habit of turning our attention to God — when we feel trouble coming on, and when we don’t — this is the third tool Jesus gives us for cultivating his peace in our hearts.

## SECOND MEDITATION

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### *Conclusion & Further Reflection*

So Jesus doesn’t contradict himself. When he commands us not to let our hearts be troubled, he knows what he is saying. He knows that trouble will constantly be attacking our hearts, just as it attacked him during his Passion.

And he also knows that, with the help of his grace, we can use the three tools he gave us in the Garden of Gethsemane — repentance, prayer, and turning our attention to God — to defend and spread his peace within us, no matter what.


Take some time now to gaze at Jesus, in the silence of your heart, as he shows us the path to interior peace. And reflect on how these three tools can help you follow that path in your own, unique life-situation.

The following questions and Biblical passages may help you in your meditation.


### Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

- 1 What types of situations or events most frequently tend to threaten or disturb my interior peace?
- 2 How firmly do I believe that, by following Christ's example and plugging into his grace, I can truly learn to obey his commandment to "not let my heart be troubled"?
- 3 Reflect on the three tools for cultivating interior peace: repentance, prayer, turning one's attention to God. What place have they had in my life over all? What place do they have in my day-to-day life?


### Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation

  
*Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*


– Philippians 4:6-8

  
*LORD, my heart is not proud; nor are my eyes haughty. I do not busy myself with great matters, with things too sublime for me. Rather, I have stilled my soul; like a weaned child to its mother, weaned is my soul. Israel, hope in the LORD, now and forever.*


– Psalm 131

  
*My soul, be at rest in God alone, from whom comes my hope. God alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not fall. My deliverance and honor are with God, my strong rock; my refuge is with God. Trust God at all times, my people! Pour out your hearts to God our refuge!*


– Psalm 62:6-9

  
*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, on your own intelligence do not rely; in all your ways be mindful of him, and he will make straight your paths.*

– Proverbs 3:5-6

  
*For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel: By waiting and by calm you shall be saved, in quiet and in trust shall be your strength.*

– Isaiah 30:15

  
*Princes persecute me without reason, but my heart reveres only your word.  
I rejoice at your promise, as one who has found rich spoil.  
Falsehood I hate and abhor; your law I love.  
Seven times a day I praise you because your judgments are righteous.  
Lovers of your law have much peace; for them there is no stumbling block.  
I look for your salvation, LORD, and I fulfill your commandments.  
I observe your testimonies; I love them very much.  
I observe your precepts and testimonies; all my ways are before you.*

– Psalm 119:161-168

*You may want to read the whole Psalm, which St. Augustine surmises was prayed by Jesus in Gethsemane*

## CONFERENCE

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### *Introduction*

We have been meditating on the centrality of interior peace for the Christian life, and on Jesus' own example of how to cultivate and protect this interior peace amid life's struggles.

Now we are going to switch gears a little bit. In this conference, I want to ask and answer — answer at least partially — two questions. The second question will flow from our answer to the first question.

## CONFERENCE

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### *Why Is It So Hard?*

The first question is this: Why is it so hard to keep our hearts from being troubled? The short answer to that question is pretty simple: Because we are fallen human beings living in a fallen world.

St. Augustine defined peace as “*tranquilitas ordinis*,” or, loosely translated, “the tranquility that comes from having things in their proper place.” Now, because we are fallen human beings in a fallen world, we live in the midst of dis-order, and this is constantly disturbing our interior peace. To understand this idea, let's take a look at two scenarios.

## CONFERENCE

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### *Scenario #1: The Faith-Filled Person*

Scenario #1 is that of the Faith-Filled Person. Our faith tells us that God loves us infinitely and unconditionally, that he is all-powerful and all-wise, and that his Providence is always watching over us.

If someone believes that completely, in such a way that those truths completely fill their mind, their heart, and their whole being, then nothing — not even horrible tragedies — will be able to disturb their interior peace for long.

The Catechism points this out in #222: “Believing in God, the only One, and loving him with all our being has enormous consequences for our whole life.”

The Catechism then goes on to list a bunch of those consequences.

In #227, it points out the consequence that this faith “...means trusting God in every circumstance, even in adversity.”

And then the Catechism quotes a beautiful, powerful prayer of St. Teresa of Avila that expresses how this faith can keep our souls in peace:



*Let nothing trouble you  
Let nothing frighten you  
Everything passes  
God never changes  
Patience  
Obtains all  
Whoever has God  
Wants for nothing  
God alone is enough.*

So, the person who is completely Faith-Filled will be able to live this deep interior peace in spite of any storm — exterior or interior — that may come their way. And we see this exemplified in the lives of the saints, those Christians whose faith has really matured.

## CONFERENCE

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### *Illustration: St. Thomas More*

One example that has always struck me is that of St. Thomas More. He was a layman, a husband and father, and a scholar. He had risen to become the Chancellor of England under King Henry VIII.

But he refused to go along with Henry's plan to make himself the head of the Church of England, but that required rejecting the God-given authority of the Pope. As a result, he was accused of treason, imprisoned, repeatedly interrogated and bullied, and then executed by beheading.

Witnesses to his execution tell us that they were amazed at how peaceful and recollected he appeared as he knelt down and put his head on the chopping block. In fact, it seemed that the executioner was noticeably more nervous and perturbed than the victim.

The executioner was so distraught that the future martyr had to intervene and calm him down. St. Thomas More looked up at the distressed executioner, smiled, and said: “Pluck up thy spirits, man, and be not afraid to do thine office.” That’s the kind of interior peace that flows from being mature in our faith, from being completely faith-filled.

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## CONFERENCE

### *Scenario #2: The Faith-Pilgrim*

The second scenario is that of the faith-pilgrim. This is the person who believes, but who has not yet integrated every sector of their life with their faith. They are still *on the way* to being completely faith-filled — they are pilgrims.

Most of us fall into this category. We *believe*, but our faith is not yet fully mature. Our fallen nature, and this fallen world, are still blocking our faith from filling to the brim our minds, hearts, and souls.

There are two things we can do to move forward along the path to becoming completely faith-filled.

- First of all, we can nourish and exercise our faith: we do this by prayer, study, worthily receiving the sacraments, and intentionally growing in virtue.
- And secondly, we can remove the blocks that are keeping our faith from reaching every corner of our being.

If we only do the first, our progress will be very slow. We need to do the second as well — even though it is a bit harder.

This is why all the great spiritual writers in the history of the Church agree that self-knowledge is so central to spiritual growth. We have to discover those aspects of our personality, character, background, and tendencies that are impeding the flow of God’s grace in our lives.

Think about it like this. If you pour water into a glass that has stones inside of it, the glass may appear to be full of water, but in fact it could hold a lot more, if you took out the stones. That’s our fallen nature.

We are full of complexes, emotional and behavior patterns, prejudices, and attitudes that are not in harmony with the truths of our faith. They are like the rocks that make it impossible for the water to fill the glass completely.

These produce fears and attachments that work against our faith and, when they are triggered by some circumstance or experience, they become disturbers of our interior peace.

Unless we discover what they are, acknowledge them, and allow God’s grace to dissolve, remove, transform, and heal them, we will simply never become completely faith-filled, no matter how much water we keep pouring into the glass.

That’s our fallen nature, constantly being aggravated by the fallen world in which we live, and that’s why it’s so hard for us to keep our hearts from being troubled.

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## CONFERENCE

### *How Can We Grow?*

Having answered the first question (why is it so hard for us to not let our hearts be troubled), we are now ready to pose and tackle the second question.

We have seen that in order to become completely faith-filled, and so to enjoy the deep and lasting peace of the saints, we need to grow in self-knowledge. We need to learn to identify the hidden blocks to our faith so that, with God’s help, we can remove them - that’s what self-knowledge helps us to do.

So how can we grow in this necessary self-knowledge? In a certain sense, every aspect of the spiritual life is supposed to help us grow in self-knowledge. But three spiritual practices are especially helpful. I call them the self-knowledge accelerators, and I would like to comment briefly on each one.

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## CONFERENCE

### *Mental Prayer*

The first self-knowledge accelerator is mental prayer. Mental prayer is also called Christian meditation. This is the kind of prayer that involves reflection on God’s word, listening to God’s voice within us, and conversing with God in the quiet of our hearts using our own words.

We don’t have time in this conference to explain how to do a Christian meditation, but I do want to point out why this kind of prayer is so powerful in relation to deepening our self-knowledge.

## CONFERENCE

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### *Discovering Self-Worth*

When we engage in mental prayer on a regular basis, we give the Holy Spirit a chance to speak to our personal needs, to enlighten us as only we need to be enlightened.

When this happens, we begin to see ourselves from God's perspective. We begin to see ourselves as truly loved, valued, and treasured by God.

This nourishes in our hearts a deep and true sense of self-worth — one that does not depend on unstable foundations, like the opinions of other people or the excellence of our own achievements.

With this foundational sense of self-worth in place, we find ourselves much less afraid to face our own flaws, weaknesses, wounds, and needs.

In other words, as mental prayer enables us to see ourselves from God's perspective, we become free to accept ourselves as we truly are — and that is essential for healthy self-knowledge.

## CONFERENCE

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### *Discovering the True Ideal*

Mental prayer also helps us discover and fall in love with the true ideal for our lives. The fallen world is full of false ideals. It measures the meaning of life in terms of money, or popularity, or achievements, or pleasure.

When we compare ourselves to those ideals and pursue them, we are trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. We are not made for those things; we are made for God. True meaning in life comes from living in communion with God. In mental prayer, that's what we meditate on: what communion of God looks like, what it implies, how to deepen it...

In mental prayer, we turn our gaze over and over again to Jesus, our true model. We turn our attention to the true goal of our lives, the true, God-given ideal: to know, love, and imitate Jesus.

As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it:

*...[L]et us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us, while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith.*

– 12:1-2

Having a false ideal distorts our understanding of our true identity. The habit of mental prayer gradually corrects the false ideal of the fallen world and replaces it with the true ideal and our true identity: Christians, other Christs.

## CONFERENCE

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### *The Sacrament of Confession*

The second great accelerator of self-knowledge is the sacrament of Confession. God invented this sacrament because he knew we would need it. We need to hear the words of forgiveness and mercy spoken out loud, in a particular time and place.

We need that because we are human beings who live in the midst of time and space. But we also need to speak out loud our own sins, faults, and imperfections. This makes our repentance — one of the essential tools for peace of soul — ongoing and unmistakable.

When we say our sins, faults, and imperfections out loud in the confessional, we own them and take responsibility for them — they can't stay lurking in the shadows and continue doing their damage in secret.

When we make confession a regular part of our spiritual lives — which the Church highly recommends — we also make the examination of conscience a regular part of our lives.

Every day we take a few minutes at night to reflect on how God has been acting in our lives, and how we have been responding, and what has kept us from responding well.

And before going to confession, we take extra time to identify not just the isolated falls and failings, but the trends of weakness and selfishness.

And since we do all this in the context of a sacrament, we know that God is also at work during all those moments of self-reflection and examination.

By preparing for and going to confession on a regular basis, we give the Holy Spirit a chance to show us the blocks, the behavior patterns and attitudes that are at the roots of our selfish acts.

And all of those benefits come in addition to the grace of forgiveness and renewed strength that always happens in confession, and the sound advice that we often get from a good confessor. This is why regular confession, lived with humility and simplicity, is a powerful accelerator of self-knowledge.

## CONFERENCE

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### *Spiritual Direction*

Mental prayer and frequent confession are the first two self-knowledge accelerators, so important for helping us to become more and more faith-filled.

The third is Spiritual Direction. Spiritual direction adds an objective perspective to our own self-reflection. Often, we are so immersed in the struggles of our faith-journey that we can't see the whole picture.

Like a player on the field in the football game, we only see a small part of what's going on. A spiritual director is like the coach up in the booth during the game, able to see the whole field and provide a more complete and accurate analysis of the situation.

Spiritual direction also gives us a remedy for our blind-spots. We are often simply unable to see certain factors that are at work in our spiritual lives, and so we need someone else to help us.

It's like you wanted to check the brakelights on your car — you can't do it unless someone else stands behind the car while you press on the brake pedal.

Here's how Pope Benedict XVI put it in an address to future spiritual directors



*Everyone, in fact, and in a particular way all those who have received the divine call to a closer following, needs to be supported personally by a sure guide in doctrine and expert in the things of God. A guide can help defend oneself from facile subjectivist interpretations, making available his own supply of knowledge and experiences in following Jesus.*

– Address to Discalced Carmelites of the  
Teresianum, May 19, 2011

But in order for spiritual direction to be effective, we have to keep a few things in mind. The most helpful form of spiritual direction is when we have a real, ongoing relationship with our spiritual director. If we are constantly switching spiritual directors, or just meeting when we are in the midst of a crisis, we lose a lot of the benefits.

Likewise, we need to be open and honest with our spiritual director. We can't just say what we think we should say — we need to talk about what we are really experiencing in our faith-journey, the real problems, the real joys, the real challenges.

And finally, we need to approach spiritual direction with an open mind, with a humble and sincere willingness to change. Otherwise, we may filter out what we most need to hear. Spiritual direction, by giving us objectivity and overcoming our blind-spots, is the third important self-knowledge accelerator.

## CONFERENCE

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### *Conclusion & Questionnaire*

The fight to follow Christ's example of maintaining peace of soul even in our own Gethsemane-moments requires continual growth in self-knowledge. Without that, we won't be able to identify the attitudes, behavior patterns, and complexes that impede our faith from penetrating every corner of our lives. We are all pilgrims of faith, and we are all seeking to become more and more faith-filled.

And that requires taking the rocks out of the glass — removing the blocks that impede the flow of God's grace in our lives — which in turn requires continual growth in self-knowledge.

Take a few moments now to go over the personal questionnaire; it is designed to help you reflect on how you can take better advantage of the three self-knowledge accelerators, so that your faith can better spread the peace of Christ in your soul.

- 1 Am I more faith-filled today than I was a year ago — in other words, am I gradually growing in the Christian virtue of interior peace? What signs indicate that I am or am not?
- 2 What is my attitude towards my own spiritual neediness? Do I tend to be more demanding and harsh with myself than God is with me? If so, why?
- 3 Reflect on the situations that most often tend to steal my peace of soul. How might a deeper faith in God's personal love for me, in his goodness, power, and providence change my reaction to those situations?
- 4 Am I a better pray-er today than I was a year ago? What signs indicate that I am or am not?
- 5 How would I describe the ideal I am striving for in my life (in my practical, day-to-day life), and where does that ideal come from?
- 6 What could I do this week to improve the quality of my mental prayer?
- 7 How important is the sacrament of confession in my mind and heart? Do I go to confession regularly and frequently, as the Church recommends? Why or why not?
- 8 How prayerful are my examinations of conscience, both the ones I make at the end of each day, and the ones I make as I prepare for confession?
- 9 How convinced am I that spiritual direction is an especially useful tool for every Christian who wants to "live responsibly... the new life in Christ," as Pope Benedict XVI put it?

- 10 What inhibits spiritual direction from being more fruitful in my life, and what can I do to make better use of it?

**NOTES**

*Record Your Thoughts Here*

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