



WELCOMING THE WORD

A RETREAT GUIDE ON THE ANNUNCIATION

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produced by Coronation
coronationmedia.com

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

1 FIRST MEDITATION

God Is Always Knocking at Our Door

- *The Fact of This*
- *The Reason Behind This*
- *The Gift of Meaning*
- *Conclusion & Further Reflection*

4 SECOND MEDITATION

Three Keys for Opening the Door of Our Hearts to Christ

- *Am I Letting Him In?*
- *Humility and Donatello*
- *Wonder and Tanner*
- *Gratitude and Blessed Fra Angelico*
- *Conclusion & Further Reflection*

6 CONFERENCE

Five Common Angels

- *God Sends “Messengers”*
- *A First Common Angel: Mental Prayer*
- *A Second Common Angel: God’s Will*
- *A Third Common Angel: Beauty in Nature and Art*
- *A Fourth Common Angel: Inspirations of the Holy Spirit*
- *A Fifth Common Angel: The Goodness of Other People*
- *Conclusion & Personal Questionnaire*
- *The Angelus*

INTRODUCTION

God Wants to Be Involved

God is always speaking to us; he is always thinking of us. He is not a distant God, as some philosophers have tried to describe — like a watchmaker who designed the universe, wound it up, and then lets it wind down all on its own.

No, our God wants to be involved in our lives. He is the God of the Incarnation; he came to earth to be with us, to be close to us, and to lead us by the hand all the way back to our true, everlasting home in heaven.

As Pope Benedict XVI put it:



[God] is no stranger; he has a face; the face of Jesus.

– Urbi et Orbi, 25 December 2010

How often do you see that face in your daily life? How often do you hear God’s voice speaking to your heart? If he is always speaking to us, we should be always hearing him.

Unfortunately, most of us often find it hard to hear God’s voice. The world is so noisy; our lives are so busy; our worries are so pressing. Instead of welcoming God’s Word each moment, we often tend to miss it.

But there is hope. God wants us to learn to hear him better, and he will help us, if we let him.

In this Retreat Guide, *Welcoming the Word*, we will turn our attention to one of the Bible’s greatest listeners, the Blessed Virgin Mary. We will reflect on how she welcomed the Word at the moment of the Annunciation, and learn to follow her example.

- In the first meditation-starter, we will ponder the truth that God is always speaking to us.
- In the second meditation-starter, we will look at the attitudes of Mary’s heart that made her so open and receptive to God’s Word.
- And in the conference, we will look briefly at five common messengers that God uses to send us his words.

Before we begin, take a few moments to thank God for this opportunity to be with him, to listen to his Word. And ask him for all the graces you need so that you can be renewed in your mind and your heart during this retreat — and most especially, ask for the grace to learn how to Welcome, better and better, the Word.

INTRODUCTION

The Gospel Passage of the Annunciation

Before you move on to the first meditation-starter, you may want to read over, slowly and reflectively, the passage from Luke, Chapter 1, where we find the story of the Annunciation:



In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin’s name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, “Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” But Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?”

And the angel said to her in reply, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God.” Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

– Luke 1:26-38

FIRST MEDITATION

God Is Always Knocking: The Fact of This

God is always knocking at our door; he is always looking for a way to enter more deeply into our lives; he is always reaching out to us, invading our lives — so to speak — with the saving and redeeming power of his love. This is a fact that God has revealed to us in many, many ways.

- He did it when he took the initiative to create us — he called the universe into being; he called each one of us into being.
- He did it after Original Sin — he went looking for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; he searched them out.
- He did it with Abraham and throughout the whole history of the Old Testament.
- And he did it most wonderfully of all with the Incarnation of his Son in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the sending into the world of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity.

Here is how St. Luke begins his description of the Annunciation of this amazing event to Mary:



In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth...

– Luke 1:26

“The angel Gabriel was sent from God”... This is how salvation happened: mankind didn’t climb up to heaven to steal it. No, God reached out — as he always does — to give it to us.

As St. John puts it in his Gospel:



For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.

– John 3:16

God enters into our story, and he enters into our lives: he is always looking for ways to come afresh, anew, more deeply. This is so central to God’s way of behaving towards us that the very first paragraph of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* highlights it.

It says:



...at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength.

– CCC I

At every time and in every place, God is drawing close to us, calling out to us, approaching us; that means he is always thinking about us, loving us, valuing us, desiring us — each one of us.

And in the *Youth Catechism*, the *YOUCAT*, we find the same foundational idea described like this:



Anyone who wants to believe needs a heart that is ready to listen... In many ways God seeks contact with us. In every human encounter, in every moving experience of nature, in every apparent coincidence, in every challenge, every suffering, there is a hidden message from God to us. He speaks even more clearly to us when he turns to us in his Word or in the voice of our conscience. He addresses us as friends.

– YOUCAT 20

God is always knocking at our door, always “Seeking contact with us,” endeavoring to draw us deeper into his friendship. Isn’t that *amazing*?

FIRST MEDITATION

God Is Always Knocking: The Reason Behind This

And yet, deep in the human heart there lurks a question about this amazing fact: Why? Why does God constantly try to draw closer to me, to attract my attention, to come into my life?

The answer to this question we find in the first words that the Archangel Gabriel addressed to Mary when he came to announce the good news of the Incarnation.

“Hail, favored one!” he exclaims, “the Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28).

Mary is the “favored one,” the one whom God filled with his grace, the one who, in a sense, attracted God’s attention: she is the one whom God beheld and loved. And yet, Mary is in another sense an image of the Church and of every Christian.

The Church too is “highly favored” and filled with God’s grace; the Church too attracts the love of God and becomes the spouse of Christ. And every single Christian receives that same grace, the grace that filled the Blessed Virgin Mary, when we are baptized; God is attracted to us and comes to dwell in our souls and to embrace us.

Each one of us, truly, is “highly favored”: God beholds us, loves us, and is drawn to us. This is the reason he is always knocking at our door.

The French writer Julien Green put it like this:



You cannot imagine at all how much you interest God; he is interested in you as if there were no one else on earth.

– quoted, YOUCAT 43

And Pope Benedict XVI, in his first public homily as pope, expressed it like this:



We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.

– quoted, YOUCAT 43

FIRST MEDITATION

The Gift of Meaning

So God is always knocking at our door, in a sense, because he can’t help it: he is in love with us, and he longs to be with us. But his love is not a selfish love; his love is pure and life-giving, not corrupt and corrupting. And so, when he comes into our lives, he comes not to take, but to give.

And what does he give? He gives us what we long for more than anything: meaning. When God comes into our lives, he gives it meaning, he gives it purpose. And that’s what we need most.

We can endure any hardship if we know that it has meaning, that there is a worthwhile purpose behind it. And when we let God into our lives, that’s what he brings.

This is what Mary experienced at the Annunciation. When she said yes to God’s invitation, she became a co-redeemer; she became a co-worker with God in the greatest project the universe has ever known: the salvation of fallen humanity.

She became a Christ-bearer; she brought God into the world. And that’s what we are too; Christ-bearers, co-workers in the salvation of the world. That’s what it means to be a Christian, to be a member of the Church: we share in the very mission of Jesus.

This mission isn’t a burden; God doesn’t give it to us to put pressure on us. No, it’s a gift; God calls us to be his witnesses in order to give us something to do with our lives that really matters, that has true, lasting meaning; something truly worthwhile to live and to die for. He knows that without this kind of transcendent purpose, we cannot truly be fulfilled.

FIRST MEDITATION

Conclusion & Further Reflection

To experience this love of God and the deep meaning that it gives to our lives, we have to welcome the Word; we have to welcome God’s attempts to come into contact with us, just as Mary did.

Whenever God knocks on the door of our hearts, we have to open it and let the seeking Lord come in. How we can do that better and better will be the topic of the next meditation.

But for now, let’s take some time simply to savor this fact, that God is always seeking us out, wanting to enter into our lives, to shower his love on us, to give our lives deeper meaning. Let’s thank him for that.

Let’s allow the Holy Spirit to convince us that it’s true — because it is: we are no farther from God’s heart than Nazareth was, and yet, he found his way there.

He is constantly trying to find his way to us too. To help you savor this truth, you may find it useful to reflect on some of the following questions and scriptural quotations:

- 1 When have I experienced God making an Annunciation in my life? Remember, savor, and thank God for those times.
- 2 How deeply and firmly do I believe that God truly loves me and is interested in my life? What attitudes or fears tend to inhibit my acceptance of that truth?
- 3 How do you think Mary would describe the meaning of her life after the Annunciation? How would you describe the meaning of your life?



In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins.

– I John 4:10, NABR



Because you are precious in my eyes and honored, and I love you...

– Isaiah 43:4, NABR



I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me.

– Galatians 2:20, NABR



I command you: be strong and steadfast! Do not fear nor be dismayed, for the LORD, your God, is with you wherever you go.

– Joshua 1:9, NABR



I will instruct you and show you the way you should walk, give you counsel with my eye upon you.

– Psalm 32:8, NABR

SECOND MEDITATION

Am I Letting Him In?

In our better moments, we are glad to know that God is always knocking at our door and wanting to sweep us up into the great adventure of his friendship and his work of redemption.

But not all our moments are better moments.

We are not always glad about God's interest in us. In fact, because of our fallen nature, we often resist God's action in our lives, and are oblivious to his knocks. Since God is too respectful to force his way into the inner chamber of our souls, our resistance to his action can impede our spiritual growth.

In the Annunciation, Mary shows us at least three attitudes or interior dispositions that we need to cultivate in order to overcome that resistance and welcome God's Word as fruitfully as possible, just as she did.

SECOND MEDITATION

Humility and Donatello

The first attitude that opens our hearts to God is humility. Mary shows her humility in her initial reaction to the angel's greeting.

St. Luke tells us that Mary "was greatly troubled at what was said" (Luke 1:29). It wasn't the appearance of the angel that troubled Mary, as is so often the case when angels appear to people in the Bible. Rather, it was "what was said," that troubled her, the message itself. She was troubled because she didn't think herself worthy of such a great mission, such a singular calling. She was humble: she knew her littleness.

A proud person might have reacted to the angel by saying something like: "Oh, of course; I've been waiting for God to figure out that he needs me to help him save the world." But Mary didn't react like that.

She was, in a sense, surprised at God's abundant generosity towards her; she did not have an entitlement mentality. We also see her humility later on. When she gives her yes to God, Mary says, "may it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

She didn't insist on doing things her own way, or on getting a fuller answer to her questions — no, she humbly accepted God's ways, and obeyed.

This humility comes across beautifully in a relief sculpture by the great Italian Renaissance artist, Donatello.

In this depiction of the Annunciation, notice how Mary is on the one hand leaning towards the angel, as she turns her head to listen to what he has to say. In this gesture, we see a preview of her consent, of her humble obedience.

But on the other hand, she is also pulling away from the angel, conceding the space to him, so to speak. She is troubled by what she hears; she feels sincerely undeserving of such an abundance of divine goodness.

This attitude of humility, of understanding how dependent we are upon God for everything, helps us open the door of our hearts to God, because it keeps us from falling into self-sufficiency, thinking that we can do everything on our own.

The humble person remembers that everything, from existence to salvation, is a gift from God, and that on our own, we are nothing.

When we keep fresh this awareness that we stand in constant need of God and his grace, we will be much more attentive to hearing and welcoming his Word.

SECOND MEDITATION

Wonder and Tanner

The second attitude that opens our hearts to God is wonder. Wonder keeps our souls young and sensitive to God's wonder-full activity. We see Mary model this wonder during the Annunciation in at least two moments.

First, when Mary "pondered what sort of greeting this might be," and second, when she asked the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" (Luke 1:29, 1:34).

In those phrases, we detect someone who isn't superficial or cynical or self-absorbed, who isn't deaf to God's wondrous actions, who hasn't lost the capacity to marvel at amazing things. And since God's works are all amazing, that capacity enables a soul to welcome God's Word all the time.

This spirit of wonder is captured subtly in a nineteenth century painting of the Annunciation by the American artist Henry Tanner.

He depicts the angel resplendent in other-worldly light, an intense, burning light. And Mary is seated on her bed gazing up at the supernatural apparition, mesmerized, quietly contemplating it, transfixed, maybe even a bit fearful. She is simply beholding the bright beauty of the angel, letting it flow over her, letting it suffuse her.

We are surrounded by God's marvels every day, from flowers to stars, from sacraments to saints, they shine all around us, if only we have the eyes to see.

If we cultivate this capacity to gaze wonder-fully at these marvels, surely we will become better welcomers of the Word.

SECOND MEDITATION

Gratitude and Blessed Fra Angelico

Finally, the third attitude that opens our hearts to God is gratitude. Gratitude is linked closely to humility and wonder.

It is linked to humility because we are only truly thankful when we realize that God's gifts are freely given — we can't really say that we deserve them.

It is linked to wonder because we only respond with gratitude when we recognize and allow ourselves to be impacted by the beauty — the wonder-fullness — of God's gifts.

Mary shows a deep disposition of gratitude when she describes herself to the angel, saying, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord" (Luke 1:38). The Greek word for "handmaid" is "doulos," which literally translated means "slave."

Mary gratefully recognized that everything she was and everything she had were gifts that she had received from God; she accepted her dependence on God spontaneously, warmly, generously, thankfully. She saw herself as God's handmaid; glad to serve someone who had been so giving to her.

The Dominican Friar who was also an Italian, mid-Renaissance painter, Blessed Fra Angelico, captured this spirit of gratitude in one of his depictions of the Annunciation. Here we see the angel addressing Mary with a bow, a gesture of respect and honor.

And Mary, as she receives the Word, is almost bowing in response — bowing graciously, gracefully: the Greek word for "thanks" has the same root as the word for "grace."

She shows a spirit of deference in her posture, and an eager gladness in her face — as if she were saying to the angel, “Of course I will say yes to God! How could I ever turn away from someone who has been so marvelously good to me!”

Gratitude opens our hearts to receive God’s grace because it keeps us in touch with his goodness — and we will only resist God’s action in our lives if we forget just how infinitely good he truly is.

SECOND MEDITATION

Conclusion & Further Reflection

All are the fruit of grace: Humility, wonder, and gratitude.

These three interior dispositions characterized the heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary and enabled her to welcome the Word generously, fruitfully, joyfully. If we cultivate them in our own hearts, and with the help of God’s grace we can cultivate them, the same thing will happen to us.

Take some time now to read over the passage of the Annunciation again, or take another look at the works of art we reflected on in this meditation, and admire these characteristics of Our Lady.

Ask her to intercede on our behalf, so that we too can humbly, wonder-fully, and thankfully welcome the Word.

The following questions and scriptural quotations may help your meditation.

- 1 How aware am I of my utter need for God, of my complete dependence on him? When I read this saying of Jesus, “Without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5), how does it make me feel?
- 2 When was the last time I experienced the sentiment of wonder? Why do you think children tend to delight in the wonders they find all around them, but adults tend not to?

- 3 How many times do I give thanks to God each day? How many gifts does God give me each day? Remember the most notable blessings that you have received from God throughout your life, and give thanks to him for them right now.



Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.

– Matthew 5:3, NABR



You have been told, O mortal, what is good, and what the LORD requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God.

– Micah 6:8, NABR



What gives true strength to a man’s heart is gratitude.

– Hebrews 13:9, Knox translation



Jesus said in reply, ‘Ten were cleansed, were they not? Where are the other nine? Has none but this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?’

– Luke 17:17-18, NABR

CONFERENCE

God Sends “Messengers”

The English word “angel” comes from a Greek word that means “messenger.” In Mary’s case, at the Annunciation, the messenger that God sent was a literal angel, a purely spiritual being of great power and beauty that lives perpetually in God’s presence. But those aren’t the only kind of messengers that God uses to send his saving, redeeming, creative words into our lives.

He speaks to us in many ways, and the more familiar we are with them, the better chance we will have of welcoming the Word.

In this conference, I would like to identify and reflect briefly on five common angels, five messengers that God uses on a regular basis to speak his good and life-giving words to our hearts. These five are certainly not the only ones, but they are common, everyday ones, so it’s good for us to keep them in mind.

CONFERENCE

A First Common Angel: Mental Prayer

The first common angel is Mental Prayer, also known as Christian meditation. Mental prayer is a type of prayer in which we aren't simply saying prayers, reciting someone else's words. That's vocal prayer, and it has an important place in the spiritual life. But mental prayer is different.

It involves active listening, reflecting on the truths of our faith, and conversing with God about them in the silence of our hearts, using our own words. This is what Mary did during the Annunciation when St. Luke tells us that she "pondered what sort of greeting this might be" (Luke 1:29).

If we take time every day to ponder in our hearts the words of God in the Bible, or the truths of our faith as explained in solid spiritual books, then we will become people who learn to recognize the voice of God better, and better, and better.

Mental prayer is not easy, because it depends on faith, and for most of us, our faith is still far from mature. A simple method that may help you get started is the Three-R method: Read, Reflect, Respond.

- First, read: Take the Bible or a good spiritual book, and read a section or a paragraph slowly and thoughtfully, maybe reading it over a second time. Let it resound in your heart, echo there, and sink in.
- Second, reflect: Stop reading, and think about what you have read; mull it over. What words or phrases struck you the most? What do they mean? What do they tell me about God, the Church, myself, or the world around me? How do they apply to my life?... Think deeply and peacefully about what you have read — that's the second R, reflect.
- Third, respond: While you are reflecting, God will move your heart, and you will find yourself wanting to say something to him in response to what you have read: You may want to ask him for a grace, or thank him for a blessing, or simply praise him. This is the third R: respond.

Mental Prayer is an ancient practice in the Church, and one of the most common messengers God uses to speak to our souls.

CONFERENCE

A Second Common Angel: God's Will

The second common angel that God uses to send us messages is his will. God's will is always an expression of his love, and his love is the essence of his Word; so, to consciously obey God's will is to welcome his Word.

We see Mary recognize this when she gives her yes to God and says, "May it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

When God asks us to do things, as he asked Mary to be the mother of Jesus, and we obey, we are welcoming his saving Word. And he actually asks us to do a lot of things.

He asks us to follow the Ten Commandments, to love and forgive our neighbors, to follow the teachings of the Church, to put our talents at the service of others and of Christ's Kingdom, to fulfill responsibly the duties of our state in life.

These are all manifestations of God's will; these are all ways we can move forward in our journey of faith and build up the Church.

When we obey God's will, and embrace it, we put into action what we pray for every time we say the Our Father: "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

God's will also comes to us in other ways — in circumstances that are outside of our control, things that God permits to happen, even when we don't fully understand why.

In those moments, we are called to embrace God's will even as Mary did later on, while she watched her Son dying on the Cross.

When we obey and embrace the will of God, we are welcoming the Word.

CONFERENCE

A Third Common Angel: Beauty in Nature and Art

The third common messenger God uses to send us his Word is the beauty that we find in nature and in art. Beauty, Blessed Pope John Paul II wrote, is God's goodness made visible.

When God allows us to enjoy the beauty of a sunset or an ocean breeze, he is reminding us of his love for us. When we glimpse the grandeur of a star-filled night sky, he is whispering to our hearts about the infinite expanse of his mercy.

When music inspires us, or stories delight us, or sculptures and paintings intrigue us, God is the one stirring up our souls and feeding the good desires that he has planted there.

Here too, in the beauty of nature and art, we should open wide the doors of our hearts, to let them welcome the refreshing, renewing Word of our God.

Finding opportunities to explore and appreciate and enjoy this beauty is not a waste of time; it's a way to welcome the Word.

CONFERENCE

A Fourth Common Angel: Inspirations of the Holy Spirit

The fourth angel that God often uses to send us his messages is those inspirations that seem to come out of the blue, but really come from the Holy Spirit, who acts from within our own minds and hearts.

These are the good ideas that come to you, and seem to impel you into action: sometimes they are small ideas, like the inspiration to call a friend or family member, to sign up for that Bible study at the parish, to invite a colleague to come to Mass...

Other times, they are bigger ideas, like following a vocation to the priesthood or consecrated life, or starting a new apostolate, or going on a mission trip, or choosing a particular career path, or sponsoring a worthy work of Christian evangelization or charity.

God has made us his partners in the great work of building up his Kingdom, his Church. And so he gives each one of us tasks along the way; he inspires us with good ideas that will bring joy to our hearts and to other hearts, if we generously carry them out.

Sometimes these inspirations come like a flash, and we just know they are from God. Other times they grow gradually, slowly, unfolding inside of us as a dream begins to take shape.

It's not always easy to identify which ideas come from God and which ones don't, but prayer, reflection, good advice, and a heart sincerely seeking the Lord are usually enough to do the trick.

CONFERENCE

A Fifth Common Angel: The Goodness of Other People

The fifth way that God often sends us his messages is through the goodness of those around us.

At the end of the Annunciation, the angel Gabriel tells Mary about her cousin Elizabeth, an old woman whom God graced with an unexpected pregnancy — she was preparing to give birth to John the Baptist. And Mary responds to this message by going to visit Elizabeth, to accompany her and help her in her pregnancy.

This simple, thoughtful act of goodness brings much more than human comfort to Elizabeth. When Mary enters Elizabeth's house, Elizabeth finds herself filled with the Holy Spirit. By welcoming Mary's kindness, Elizabeth welcomes the Word.

We too should welcome the kindness and attention of others, when they come to us. They too are a reflection of God's care for us, a message of his love. We don't need to hold ourselves aloof from these gestures; we should accept them graciously. We shouldn't demand that others treat us kindly and generously, but we can certainly welcome it when they do.

CONFERENCE

Conclusion & Personal Questionnaire

These, then, are five common angels, five common messengers that God uses to send us his Word: Mental Prayer, God's Will, the Beauty of Nature and Art, Inspirations of the Holy Spirit, and the Goodness of Other People.

If we increase our awareness of them, and consciously seek God's messages in them, we will become better welcomers of the Word.

And when that happens, the drama of salvation that took place in the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary can be repeated in our lives, and Jesus can continue coming into this needy world, through us, just as he came the first time through the Blessed Virgin Mary.

There is an ancient tradition in the Catholic Church that can help us stay in tune with that drama; it is called the Angelus.

The Angelus is a vocal prayer that recalls and, in a sense, replays the Annunciation. For centuries, it was customary for Catholics to pray this prayer three times a day: around sunrise, around noon, and around sunset.

In the villages and cities of medieval Europe, the church bells would ring at these times, and all the inhabitants of the area would stop what they were doing, turn their attention to God, and pray the Angelus, reliving the experience of the Blessed Virgin Mary welcoming God's Word and becoming a partner in the history of salvation.

You may want to take up that tradition yourself, as you seek to welcome God's Word more fully each day. We have reproduced the words of the Angelus at the end of this Retreat Guide.

But now, take a few minutes to reflect prayerfully on the ten questions of the personal questionnaire, questions designed to help you become more attentive to the five common angels we talked about in this conference.

1 Do I engage in mental prayer on a daily basis? Why or why not?

2 How satisfied am I with my prayer life? What specific thing could I do this week that might help me improve or revitalize it?

3 How deeply do I care about following and embracing God's will? How sincerely do I seek out God's will on a daily basis?

4 When have I experienced God's presence most powerfully in the beauty of nature? Remember, savor, and thank God for those moments.

5 When have I experienced God's presence most powerfully through the beauty of art, music, and story? Remember, savor, and thank God for those moments.

6 How can I take better advantage of the God-given power of beauty of nature and art?

7 How open am I to receiving the inspirations of the Holy Spirit throughout the day? Is there any specific inspiration that I may have been resisting recently?

8 How do I respond to the kindness and goodness of people around me? How firmly do I believe that God has a message for me in those gestures of kindness and goodness?

9 Where and when do I find it easiest to hear and welcome God's Word?

10 What circumstances or activities tend to make it harder for me to welcome God's Word?

