

THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE PROMOTION  
OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

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**“THERE IS  
FORGIVENESS  
WITH YOU”  
(Ps 130:4)**

■ ■ ■

24 HOURS FOR THE LORD  
*March 9-10, 2018*

PASTORAL GUIDE

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#### **Contributors:**

Archbishop José Octavio Ruiz Arenas, Secretary for the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization

Archbishop Arthur Roche, Secretary for the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments

Fr. Artur Godnarski, Secretary of the Polish Episcopate Conference Team for the New Evangelization

Fr. Michal Lagan, Missionary of Mercy, Monastery of Czestochowa, Poland

# Introduction

This guide aims to offer suggestions to parishes and Christian communities in preparation for the **24 Hours for the Lord** initiative. It includes proposals that obviously can be adapted to local needs and customs.

On Friday evening, March 9, and during the whole day on Saturday, March 10, it would be important to provide a special opening of the church to offer access to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, preferably in the context of Eucharistic Adoration.

In **Part One**, the guide presents some ideas to help us reflect on the purpose of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. They prepare us for a thoughtful meeting with the priest in individual confession. They also aim to help us overcome any possible resistance that often arises about going to confession.

**Part Two** offers testimonies of three people who share their conversion stories. It assists us in reflecting on ways we might change and on our awareness of God's presence in each of our lives.

**Part Three** presents the lives of two people who are able to inspire us to perform works of mercy and to continue our own personal growth after receiving absolution for our sins.

**Part Four** offers a track to use when the Church is open. Those who wish to go to confession may be assisted by the presentation here of prayer and meditation based on the word of God.



*Part One*



## Accompaniment to the Individual Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance

*“It is true that I can talk to the Lord and ask him for forgiveness, implore him. And the Lord will forgive me immediately. But it is important that I go to confession, that I sit in front of a priest who embodies Jesus, that I kneel before Mother Church, called to dispense the mercy of Christ. There is objectivity in this gesture of genuflection before the priest; it becomes the vehicle through which grace reaches and heals me.”*

— POPE FRANCIS,

*The Name of God Is Mercy* (pp. 22–23)

## I

### **Why Go to Confession?**

#### **Youcat 224: Why did Christ give us the sacrament of Penance?**

*Christ's love is shown in the fact that he seeks the lost and heals the sick. That is why he gave us the sacraments of healing and restoration, in which we are freed from sin and strengthened in our physical and spiritual weakness.*

#### **Youcat 226: But we have Baptism, which reconciles us with God; why then do we need a special sacrament of Reconciliation?**

*Baptism does snatch us from the power of sin and death and brings us into the new life of the children of God, but it does not free us from human weakness and the inclination to sin. That is why we need a place where we can be reconciled with God again and again. That place is confession.*

#### **Youcat 228: Who can forgive sins?**

*God alone can forgive sins. Jesus could say "Your sins are forgiven" (Mk 2:5) only because he is the Son of God. And priests can forgive sins in Jesus' place only because Jesus has given them that authority.*

Many people say, "I can go directly to God; why do I need a priest?" God, though, wants it otherwise. We rationalize our sins away and like to sweep things under the rug. That is why God wants us to tell our sins and to acknowledge them in a personal encounter. Therefore, the following words from the

Gospel are true of priests: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (Jn 20:23).

**Youcat 239: What are the positive effects of confession?**

*Confession reconciles the sinner with God and the Church.*

The second after absolution is like a shower after playing sports, like the fresh air after a summer storm, like waking up on a sunlit summer morning, like the weightlessness of a diver... Everything is contained in the word “reconciliation” (from a Latin verb meaning “to bring back together, to restore”): we are at peace with God again.

**Youcat 313: Why must a sinner turn to God and ask him for forgiveness?**

*Every sin destroys, obscures, or denies what is good; God, however, is all-good and the author of all good. Therefore every sin goes against God (also) and must be set right again through contact with him.*

## II

### **Preparation for Confession**

*Calmly, without scruples, you should think about your life, and ask forgiveness, and make a firm, specific and well-defined resolution to improve in one point and another: in that small detail which you find hard, and in that other one which usually you don't carry out as you should, and you know it.*

— St. Josemaria Escrivá, *The Forge*, 115

In your preparation for confession you may read the two texts below, seeking to illuminate your life with the truth of the word of God.

#### **Plan A**

#### **Psalm 130**

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive  
to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,  
that you may be feared.

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,  
and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the LORD  
more than watchmen for the morning,  
more than watchmen for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the LORD!  
For with the LORD there is mercy,  
and with him is plenteous redemption.  
And he will redeem Israel  
from all his iniquities.

After having read and prayed Psalm 130, traditionally called *De profundis*, our hearts are full of joy and hope. It has reminded us that, despite our sins, if we have the humility to repent and to implore the Lord for his forgiveness, we will obtain the greatest expression of his mercy: his forgiveness of our sins and his grace to continue our struggle against evil, self-centeredness, envy, and our lack of faithfulness.

This psalm of supplication, which expresses a confidence and a certainty about the Lord's love and forgiveness, was sung by the people of Israel with great humility when they went up to Jerusalem as pilgrims to prepare themselves in a better way to offer the sacrifice of expiation for their sins with new and renewed hearts. This prayer was a cry from the depths of each pilgrim's heart, a cry that expressed distress and shame for having betrayed the Lord, for having forgotten his covenant, and for being guilty of not having responded to God's love righteously. At the same time, however, it is the best psalm for expressing hope because it demonstrates full confidence in the One who forgives and does not abandon the sinner, the One who mercifully shines a light in the midst of darkness and grants grace and forgiveness.

As pilgrims who approach the altar with repentance and hope to find Our Lord, we need to let our cry of supplication and love rise up using the same words in the psalm: *“Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD! / Lord, hear my voice!”* Let us make this cry resonate in our hearts and minds to help us become aware of the seriousness of our sins, and let our tears express our remorse and our firm desire to want to follow the Lord on the path of goodness and faithfulness.

Looking at our weaknesses with humility, let us not allow darkness and desperation to overcome us, because we know that the Lord is at our side to give us strength and courage. We truly are sinners, but sinners who love God. In our spiritual poverty we can hear him tell us not to be afraid but to trust him. His mercy is infinite, and he is already ready to forgive without focusing on the gravity of our actions, because our repentance and his love are more important. Since we are weak and need strength, and God’s grace, we can say with St. Paul, *“Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more”* (Rom 5:20). Sin and forgiveness are always present in our lives, and, therefore, we need to express our repentance exclaiming with a confident and sincere heart, *“If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, / Lord, who could stand?”* This is how we turn back to God and acknowledge that he is a loving Father who is generous to forgive.

The psalmist beautifully depicts the hope that springs up in the penitent heart awaiting the Lord’s arrival to experience his loving presence, his tenderness, and his forgiveness: *“My soul waits for the LORD / more than watchmen for the morning.”* We are sinners who actually become watchmen for the morning, as we watch the horizon anxiously in the midst of the darkness to see the rising

Light with joy, the Light who illuminates our lives and gives meaning to our existence. It is he, Christ the Lord, who has accompanied us from the beginning and prompts us to wait for him as he quietly sends us his Spirit to fill our hearts with the desire to change our lives.

Before the tabernacle, as we fix our gaze on the Lord who is present in the Eucharist, we acknowledge Jesus as our Savior. He came to testify of the tenderness and clemency of the Father and to show us that God's grandeur is precisely his love, his mercy. He listens attentively to our cry of remorse and trust in him; he reminds us, in the depth of our souls, that he was put to death for our sins and was raised for our justification (see Rom 4:25).

Yes, Jesus was able to offer his life to save me. And now, before the greatness of his love and his sacrifice, I am invited to transform my life, to listen to his words, to love him with all my heart, to follow him every moment. As I do these things, I can succeed, with his grace, in living like him, in always doing good, and in giving witness to my conversion.

## **Plan B**

*“But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.”*

— Luke 15:20

When our first parents sinned in the Garden of Eden, we are told that after they heard God's footsteps that evening, as he walked in the garden, they hid themselves. They were conscious of their sins, and they were conscious of God's holiness. Sins speak to us of our weakness, incompleteness,

and sometimes helplessness. They certainly tell us that we are not gods. This is what Adam and Eve experienced, too. They saw themselves plainly, just as they were, weak human beings, clay that is easily cracked and broken, and they tried to hide that fragile reality from God and even from themselves. We need courage to face our sins — a courage that does not come from within ourselves but from the Heart of God.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son we see a different response to sin. This time, it is God's response to sinfulness. He does not hide from us. In fact, when the father in the parable sees his young son attempting to return home, he doesn't allow him to be afraid or to hide. Instead, he runs to catch his child in his arms and with tenderness to clothe him again as befits the dignity of one of his children. He hardly allows his son to share with him all the gory details of what has happened. He is so full of love for his child that all he wishes to do is to love him back into life. All that matters to him is to bring him back home, to the safety of where he belongs.

This is also what happens to us when we go to confession. The Father, through his Son, pours out that same Holy Spirit upon us. It is the Spirit of unfailing mercy. The Father's only desire is to heal and bring back to life the greatness which he gave us in baptism.

There is also another image that helps us as we prepare to go to confession. It is that of Jesus at the well of Samaria in the Gospel of St. John (see 4:1–39). Although Jesus is tired after his journey, he waits patiently for the Samaritan woman to come to the fountain of life. The tenth verse of the great sequence *Dies Irae* expresses this beautifully: "Seeking me you sit exhausted. You have redeemed me by the torment of

the Cross: do not now let such exertion be in vain.”

God always waits for us. He never tires of waiting for us. The moment of confession is the time to stop hiding and to come back home, to allow Jesus to lead us back through the gates of the garden to the place where we belong (see Gn 3:24).

Some time ago, Pope Francis visited the Philippines and went to celebrate Mass with the people of Tacloban whose lives had been torn apart by Typhoon Yolanda. As he looked at them he put aside his written sermon and said to them, as he pointed to Christ on the cross: “Remember,” he said, “God was there first. He was there before you!” The natural devastation suffered by the people of Tacloban during that disaster might well serve for us as an image of the effects of personal sinfulness in our lives and of the desperate need we have to be revived and anointed by mercy. This is what the Sacrament of Penance does.

The Lord is the one who waits patiently, longingly, lovingly for the sinner, even when we may think he has become tired of our returning! It is good for both the penitent and the priest to recall the enduring patience of God. He is there before us. He waits patiently for us. He does not give up on us.

It is worth remembering that Dante, in the *Inferno*, went to the lowest promontory to gaze into hell. It is one thing to look down into it, but a serious miscalculation eventually to look up from it!

### III

## Individual Celebration

*After making an examination of conscience, you can go to the priest. If you have difficulty in making an examination of conscience, you can always ask the confessor to help you.*

*When you present yourself as a penitent, the priest receives you warmly and speaks word of encouragement. He embodies the merciful Lord.*

*Together with the priest you make the sign of the cross and say:*

**In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.**

*The priest helps you to prepare yourself to trust in God with these or similar words:*

**May God, who has enlightened every heart, help you to know your sins and trust in his mercy.**

*The priest, according to the occasion, reads or recites from memory a text from sacred Scripture that speaks about the mercy of God and invites you to repent. For example:*

**After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.” (Mk 1:14-15, NAB)**

*At this point you confess your sins. If necessary the priest will help you, asking you questions and giving suitable advice. He will*

*invite you, finally, to demonstrate your commitment to conversion by reciting an act of contrition or some other similar formula. For example:*

**Wash me, Lord, from all my faults. Cleanse me from my sins. I recognize my guilt. My sin is always before me.**

*Now the priest will stand and lay his hands on your head, saying:*

**God, the Father of mercies,  
through the death and the resurrection of his Son,  
has reconciled the world to himself  
and sent the Holy Spirit among us  
for the forgiveness of sins;  
through the ministry of the Church,  
may God give you pardon and peace,  
and I absolve you from your sins  
in the name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit.**

*You answer:*

**Amen.**

*After absolution, the priest says:*

**Give thanks to the Lord for he is good.**

*You answer:*

**His mercy endures forever.**

*Then the priest will dismiss you, saying:*

**The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace.**

(See Rite of Penance)



*Part Two*



## Reflections

*“Our conversion: it is the grateful response to the stupendous mystery of God’s love. When we see the love that God has for us, we feel the desire to draw close to him: this is conversion.”*

— POPE FRANCIS,  
General Audience, March 5, 2014

An encounter with God's love has brought many people to reflect profoundly on their lives. We share some testimonies below that can give us things to think about in our daily walk with Christ.

*"There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."*

— Luke 15:7

## **Testimony of Leah Libresco**

When I entered the Catholic Church, my friends came with me to Mass to celebrate my baptism, confirmation, and first Communion. But when I made my first confession a few weeks later, no one was with me except the priest; there was no expectation that this sacrament was the kind of thing I would announce or celebrate.

Confession has a tendency to fade into the background of Catholic life. My friends would bring up a hymn or a homily that touched them or talk about the consolation a certain prayer had brought them, but when they talked about confession, if it was mentioned at all, the tone tended to be generically thankful. Even if it were permissible to discuss what happens in the confessional in detail, I still wouldn't expect to hear much about it. The reason is simple: no other sacrament is premised on our screw-ups. The closest secular analogies I could think of were plea bargaining and parole boards, neither of which are appropriate cocktail-party topics.

Soon after my conversion, once confession became something I *did* not just theorize about, I was surprised to

find that it was my favorite sacrament. Confession reminds me of the orders of cloistered, contemplative nuns. Unlike their active sisters, they are seldom seen outside the cloister, and they can slip from our minds, but their lives of constant prayer support and inspire the religious brothers and sisters who come out to meet us in the world. Confession's quiet, secluded grace strengthens me to seek out all other graces.

Before I experienced sacramental grace of confession for myself, I had expected that the less frequently I *had* to go to confession the lighter and freer I would feel. I was partially right. There is a kind of lightness that comes with not having gone to confession in a while, but it isn't a feeling of freedom. It's more like the lightness of being unmoored or untethered: one is free insofar as one is not attached to anything, but that's a pretty precarious way to exist.

If I let a long time pass between visits to the confessional, putting off the sacrament until I commit a mortal sin, the venial sins I've committed become fuzzier and more indistinct in my memory and feel less consequential. However, that doesn't free me from their effects; the people I've slighted or scorned are still hurt, and the distance I've opened up between my conscience and my actions makes it harder for me to repent, learn, and make amends.

Catholics are obligated to go to confession only once a year, and only mortal sins require the sacrament before a Catholic can return to Communion, but I've developed a pattern of stopping by about once every three weeks. Waiting too long isn't how I want to handle my relationship with God. After I've wronged a friend, I want to be able to apologize quickly, so that the suspense doesn't build up and make it more difficult to apologize.

Confession is my way of making up with God after

damaging my relationship with him. Although it can be difficult in the short term, I want to patch things up as soon as I can rather than leave our relationship frayed and more vulnerable to new strains.

Confession strikes me as the most “small-c” catholic of all the sacraments, which is to say the most universal. Besides the Catholic Church, only the Orthodox and a few Protestant sects offer their worshipers confession with a priest, but the need for confession is recognized by everyone, Christian or not. We all acknowledge that we fall short of being the people we ought to be, even if we wouldn’t all phrase it quite as Paul did when he asserted that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). Some people secularize the statement, saying we fall short of our duty or our potential, but either way it’s clear we don’t quite measure up, and we know it. It would be nice to be able to apologize and make up for our lapses somehow.

If Catholicism isn’t unique in diagnosing our weakness, it is unusual in offering us a treatment. The Catholic Church recognizes the universal malaise and fear that follows from our having transgressed and wounded God and our neighbors. Through confession, the Church offers us a way to receive God’s mercy and healing. The hard part is preparing to accept such a generous gift.

The gift that Christ offers in confession is much larger than I could ever repay — and even wishing to repay him diminishes the magnitude of his mercy. If I were to try to total up the gift he bestows in just one reception of the sacrament, I would have to start my tally of the graces of reconciliation and forgiveness long before I entered the confessional to seek absolution. Just knowing I will be going to confession helps teach me what my sins are. Sometimes

my sins don't feel quite real until I'm listing them, either to the priest or to myself in the line outside the confessional.

Usually, the hardest part of confession for me comes after I've listed my sins, when the priest assigns penance. I typically feel that the prayers he tasks me with are too light, that my confession hasn't been *fair*. And I'm right, sort of. The penance I'm given isn't fair — it's merciful. My Our Fathers or Hail Marys don't counterbalance the harm I've done to others, and they don't magically render me innocent. What they do is give me a way to cooperate with the grace that Christ is offering in restoring me to communion with him.

Confession isn't a trade in which I barter my regret for forgiveness. My repentance doesn't make me *deserve* this gift; it just means I've stopped hiding from Christ's mercy and started cooperating.

In the end, we are all called to be wholly united with God. Christ prays for this unity at the Last Supper: "As you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory which you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one" (Jn 17:21–23). *Theosis* is the process of preparing for this ultimate reconciliation, and the Sacrament of Reconciliation is one of the most potent graces we are offered along the way.

Until *theosis* is complete, we're all weak and jumbled up, like magnets that have been heated or dropped and whose component atoms have lost their north-south alignment. Just as an electric current can reorient a magnet, confession helps reorient me, correcting and strengthening my spiritual orientation so that I'm pulled back toward God. A simple

surge of electrical current won't cause a magnet to sprout legs and wander back for another burst of polarization. But confession, unlike electricity, can form a feedback loop, where God leads us to return to the sacraments again and again.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation bears fruit on an individual and a societal level; the grace granted to other people can help strengthen me, just as a strong magnet can briefly turn even a paper clip into a small, weak magnet. Confession primes us for all other graces by restoring our orientation toward God, so that we can follow his call through prayer, works, and other acts of love.

*Excerpted from Chapter 2,  
"Confession," in Arriving at Amen*



*"... as we forgive others ..."*

— from the Lord's Prayer

## **Testimony of Pastora Mira García**

When I was six years old, even though the guerillas and the paramilitaries were not yet in my hometown of San Carlos, Antioquia [in Colombia], my father was murdered. Years later, I was able to care for his murderer, who ended up sick, old, and neglected.

When my daughter was two years old, my first husband was killed. Right after that, I started working at the Police

Inspectorate, but I had to quit due to threats I received by the guerillas and paramilitaries who had reached the area by then.

Through a lot of hard work, I managed to start a new business selling piñatas and toys, but the guerilla and paramilitary groups continued to extort me. I decided to give away all my merchandise.

In 2001, the paramilitaries kidnapped my daughter Sandra Paola. I immediately started looking for her and, after seven grueling years of frantic search, I found her body. All my suffering made me more sensible to other people's pain so, since 2004, I have been accompanying and working with families of kidnapping victims and with people who have been displaced.

But my story did not end there. In 2005 a paramilitary group known as Heroes of Granada Bloc murdered Jorge Anibal, my youngest son.

Three days after burying my son, I took under my care a young man that was wounded. I let him stay at a house that belonged to Jorge Anibal. One day, when this young man was coming out of the house, he noticed some of our family pictures and confessed to us that he belonged to that same paramilitary group and that, in fact, he was one of my son's killers. He described in detail how they tortured him before ending his life. I thank God and Mary my mother for giving me the strength I needed to care for this young man without causing him any harm, despite the unspeakable pain I was experiencing.

I place the pain and suffering of all Colombian victims before Jesus' feet at the cross, so he can join their sorrow with his passion. I pray that, through him, this suffering can be

transformed into blessings and forgiveness, so we can break from the violence cycle that has swept Colombia for the past five decades.

As a symbol of that offering, I left before the Bojaya's Christ [statue] a shirt that Sandra Paola, my daughter, had given to my son Jorge Anibal. We had kept this shirt in our family as a keepsake, praying that this type of violence ends once and for all. We pray that peace triumphs in Colombia.

May God bless all the humanitarian, educational, and productive projects that are essential to create conditions that lead to peace for this country. May God transform the hearts of those who refuse to believe that everything can change with Christ, and those who still lack hope that Colombia can become a peaceful and caring country.

*Testimony on the occasion of Pope Francis's  
visit to Columbia, September 9, 2017*



*"I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."*

— *Matthew 18:22*

## **Testimony of Miguel Vera**

My name is Miguel. I am thirty-four years old and come from Asunción in Paraguay. There are eleven people in my family, but I am the only one who had drug problems. I overcame my dependency at *Fazenda da Esperança San Rafael* (House of Hope) in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

I used drugs for sixteen years, starting at age eleven. I

always had trouble with relationships in my family because I did not feel loved or understood by my parents. We were always fighting, and our relationship was always very tense. I don't remember ever sitting down at table for dinner with my family. "Family" was a nonexistent concept for me. My home was only a place to sleep and eat.

I first ran away from home at age eleven because the emptiness inside of me was too great. I continued in school, but I wanted "freedom." After a couple of months, I experienced drugs for the first time on the street near my school. That only made the emptiness in me worse: I did not want to go back home to deal with my family or to confront myself either, so I stopped going to school, and my parents would not let me come back home because they had lost all hope.

When I was fifteen, I committed a crime for which I was sent to prison. My father came once to visit me in prison and asked me if I wanted to change, and I told him I did. I had just been released when I broke the law again. I committed another crime, and I was incarcerated again, this time for six years. During that time I suffered a lot. I did not understand why none of my brothers and sisters ever came to visit me. The years went by and I served my time.

My parents lived very close to the church. One month after my release, a priest who was a friend of the family invited me to a place called *Fazenda da Esperança*. I had no goals in life. All those years of my life that had been lost were evident in my eyes and in my face. I agreed to go there, and ever since my first visit, I have understood what having a family meant. At the beginning, relationships and life in the community were very difficult for me. The method of healing in this community comes through the word of God, through living the Word. In the process of healing, I had a roommate whom I could not forgive at the beginning. I needed peace, and he

needed love instead.

After living there for seven months, I was given the job of improving the management of the household. Thanks to that job, I understood that God wanted something from me. My roommate got a letter from his wife once. Their relationship was not very good, and that helped me understand him better. I brought him the letter from her, and he asked me, “Brother, can you forgive me?” and I answered, “Yes, of course.” From that moment on our relationship was great. God has truly transformed us. HE is the one who restores us.

I have been completely recovered for ten years now. For the last three years, I have been responsible for the house *Quo Vadis?* next to the House of Hope in Cerro Chato in Uruguay.

*Testimony at World Youth Day in Kraków, Poland, 2016*



*Part Three*



## Inspiration

*“The restlessness of seeking the truth, of seeking God, became [for Augustine] the restlessness to know him ever better and of coming out of himself to make others know him. It was precisely the restlessness of love.”*

— POPE FRANCIS,

*Homily to the General Chapter of  
Augustinian Fathers, August 28, 2013*

# **The Spiritual Testament of Annalena Tonelli**

(selected passages)

My name is Annalena Tonelli. I was born in Forlì, Italy, on April 2, 1943. I have been working in the field of health for thirty years, but I am not a doctor. I have a law degree from Italy.

I was performing a service that had no name, without the security of a religious order, without belonging to any organization, without a stipend, without a salary, without any contributions for retirement. I am unmarried because that is the state I joyfully chose when I was young. I wanted to be given over wholly to God, and I felt it was necessary for me not to have my own family. And that was by the grace of God. I have friends who have helped me and my people for more than thirty years. I have been able to do everything thanks to them, especially the friends of the Committee Against World Hunger in Forlì. I have friends, of course, in other parts of the world, which is only natural since the needs are so great. I thank God that he has given them to me and that he continues to give them to me.

## **My Life Plan**

I left Italy in January 1969, and I have been serving the Somali people ever since. It has been thirty years of sharing with them. I have always lived with them except for short times away, living in other countries because of unforeseeable circumstances that forced me to leave. I chose to live for others: the poor, the suffering, the abandoned, the unloved. I was a small child when I first felt this way, and I have felt this way ever since then and expect to continue to do so until the end.

I left Italy after six years of serving the poor in one of the slums of my birth city: the children in the local orphanage, little girls who were mentally handicapped or victims of gross domestic abuse, and the poor of the Third World, thanks to the work of the Committee Against World Hunger that I helped to found. I believed I could not give myself completely if I stayed in my own country because the restrictions on my activities seemed so limiting and suffocating to me.

I soon understood that a person can serve and love anywhere, but now I was in Africa and felt that God had led me there, so I stayed there with joy and gratitude. I left having decided to “shout the gospel with my life” following behind Charles de Foucauld [a French Catholic missionary priest in Algeria] who had inspired my path.

At the beginning of such a new and powerful experience in Africa, I went to the northwest part of Kenya as a teacher, since it was the only work I could properly do without posing a risk to anyone. Most of the students in that part of Kenya were Somalis. These were times of intense preparation for new lessons of nearly all the material, while making up for the lack of other teachers and studying the local language, culture, and traditions — times of intense involvement in teaching, in my deep conviction that culture is a force for freedom and growth.

I recall that, almost immediately after my arrival, I fell in love with a starving baby who also had sickle cell. It was a time of terrible famine, and I saw many people die of hunger. In the course of my life, I witnessed another famine: ten months of hunger in Merca in southern Somalia. I can say that it was such a traumatizing experience for me that it put my faith in jeopardy. I had taken in fourteen children to live with me who had famine-related diseases. I immediately donated blood to that baby and asked my students to do the same. One of my students gave blood, and then many others did, too,

overcoming the resistance of prejudice and of a world closed in on itself that seemed to me at that time to ignore any kind of solidarity with and compassion for the needy.

## **Healing**

I knew nothing about medicine. I began to bring the people rainwater that I collected from the roof of the beautiful house the government had given me because I was a secondary school teacher. I would go with full tanks; I would empty the salty water of the tanks of Wajir, and I would refill them with that fresh water. The people would make gestures at me, apparently disturbed by the clumsiness of that young white woman whose presence they seemed to want to get rid of quickly. Everything was against me then. I was young and therefore not worthy of being listened to or respected. I was white and therefore scorned by a race that considered itself superior to everyone else (white, black, yellow — people of any nationality other than theirs). I was a Christian and therefore despised, rejected, and feared; everyone was convinced that I had come to Wajir to make converts. And I was not married, something absurd in a world where celibacy did not exist and was not valued by anyone and was in fact a detriment. Thirty years later I am still not married, so I am viewed with scorn and compassion throughout the Somali world that does not know me well. Only the people who know me say, and repeat endlessly, that I am a Somali just like they are. They say that I am a real mother to those I have rescued, saved, healed, and helped (as they overlook the fact that I am not a natural mother and never will be).

I began to study and observe; I was with them every day, seeing them “on my knees.” I was next to them when they hurt themselves and had no one to care for them, to watch over them, to give them strength. After some years in the

TB Manyatta [open-air treatment centers for tuberculosis], when sick people knew they were dying, they wanted only me beside them so they could die feeling loved. I began to oversee people's treatments after they were released from the hospital. It became a widely known fact. People had never heard before of treatments being completed in the desert.

In September 1976, I decided to invite some nomads to settle for a while in an area of the desert in front of the Rehabilitation Center for the Disabled, where I was working together with companions who had lived with me over the years — all volunteers without pay, all working for the poor and for Jesus Christ. Together with them I had established a center where we could rehabilitate all the people with poliomyelitis from the northeast desert during the course of ten years.

We were a family. In addition to people with poliomyelitis, we welcomed particularly difficult cases to cure and rehabilitate, people who were especially afflicted: the blind, the deaf and dumb, the physically and mentally handicapped. The young people grew up with us — we became their “moms” over time — and I am still today their constant reference point.

### **Overcoming Evil with Good**

It was 1984. The government of Kenya tried to commit genocide against a desert tribe of nomads. They were going to exterminate about 50,000 people, but they killed only 1,000. I succeeded in preventing this massacre from going forward and saw it brought to an end. I was deported a year later because of it. I was silent because of the little ones I had left behind at home who could have been punished if I spoke out. Instead, the Somalis talked about it and fought for light to be shed on the truth about the genocide. Sixteen years went by, and finally the government of Kenya publicly admitted their

guilt, asked for forgiveness, and promised compensation for the victims' families.

At the time of the massacre, I was arrested and brought before a military court. The authorities, none of them Somalis and all of them Christians, told me they had set up two ambushes that I had providentially escaped, but I would not escape a third time. One of them, a practicing Christian, asked me what moved me to act as I had. I responded that I was doing it for Jesus Christ, who asks us to lay down our lives for our friends.

I have experienced many times in the course of my lengthy existence that there is no evil that will not be exposed and no truth that will not be revealed. The important thing is to continue fighting as though the truth has already been revealed, as though injustices have not harmed us, and as though evil has not triumphed. One day good would shine forth. We ask God for the strength to know how to wait because it can involve a long time ... even as long as after our deaths. I live waiting for God, and I know that this waiting is less burdensome for me than for others who wait for things that human beings might do.

### **Why This Choice?**

I want to follow only Jesus Christ. Nothing else interests me as powerfully as Christ and the poor in Christ. I made a choice for radical poverty for his sake, even if I am not poor the same way a truly poor person is — the poor who fill my everyday life. I can do no less.

In addition, during the long course of my life, there have been times spent in hermitages, other times of silence, the word of God, great books, wonderful friends. There have been many, many who have inspired my life, especially in the Catholic faith: the Desert Fathers, the famous monks, Francis of Assisi,

Chiara Lubich, Thérèse of Lisieux, Teresa of Avila, Charles de Foucauld, Fr. René Voillaume, Sister Mary, Giovanni Vannucci, Primo Mazzolari, Lorenzo Milani, Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave, Pina and Maria Teresa, and others. But at the center it has always been God and Jesus Christ. Nothing is important to me outside of God, outside of Jesus Christ.

### **Believing and Loving**

In many ways, faith can be such a dark mystery, this faith that is above all a gift, a grace, and a blessing. Why me and not you? Why me and not her, or him, or them? Nevertheless, life has meaning only if you have love. Nothing makes sense outside of love. My life has known so many, many dangers; I have risked my life countless times, and I was in the midst of a war for years. I saw marks in the bodies of those I loved, and then in my own body, of the wickedness of human beings, their perversity, their cruelty, their iniquity, and I came out of all of it with an unshakable conviction that the only thing that counts is love. Even if God did not exist, only love has meaning; only love frees human beings from all that makes them slaves; only love makes people breathe, grow, and flourish. Only love makes us able to fear nothing, to turn the other cheek that is not hurt to mockery and beating by the one who strikes us because he does not know what he is doing. Only love makes us able to risk our lives for our friends, to believe all things, to endure all things, and to hope all things. It is then that our lives become worthy of living, that our lives become beauty, grace, and blessings.

### **Educating**

I have been working with schools for thirty years: I organize them, I build them when necessary, and I finance them. It is most surely an event of grace for a person to be

able to live in God. It is the case, however, that with education a human being flourishes more easily into someone who is capable of living in God, the Creator and giver of every good thing.

There are sick people who ask to be readmitted to the center in order to complete a study of the Koran, and then they all feel like teachers and proudly show others their accomplishments, their achievements, their growth in human dignity.

There was never any special education instituted in Somalia, never a school for deaf children, blind children, or mentally handicapped children. University professors, until they had seen our school, did not believe it was possible to educate a deaf child; no one in that country believed it was possible. Today, everyone knows there is nothing a deaf child cannot do, nothing a deaf child cannot learn, nothing a deaf child cannot feel or understand. Of course, it is a long road, but already we see a light, though it is perhaps still a bit dim. But in the distance there is a light shining so brightly that it makes one's heart leap with joy and expectation for what will no longer be distant one day: a new heaven and a new earth. Our school started with three deaf children, then five, then eight, then twelve ... and today we have fifty-two. We started teaching them in a room in the small house that I rented in Borama, and then we built a roof over an open space outside as the number of children grew. Next we built another small room at the back of the house. Meanwhile, some physically handicapped children who were victims of poliomyelitis and of the war pleaded with us to accept them into our school because they were afraid of going to school with the normal children. Ours is a harsh world, a world of the strong in which there is no room for the weak. We decided to take them in. We told them that when they had enough self-confidence —

knowing as much or more than the others would inevitably give them the strength to rise up and feel like the others — we would pay their taxes to go to the normal schools. We hired an excellent teacher for them.

Two years ago, we accepted children from a despised clan of Somalis: blacksmiths, tanners, barbers, and small-game hunters. They had never sent their children to school. They have been ghettoized: their daughters do not marry Somalis from other clans and their sons do not marry young women from other clans. They rebel against God and others because of being rejected, scorned, and marginalized, but they are hard workers. At one point some of the educated and wealthy people in the group begged us to accept their children in our school because it is a rigorous school: we use discipline and have committed teachers who love the children, who love teaching, and who are prepared. We decided to take their children.

### **Forgiving and Being Set Free**

Every day at the TB Center we make every effort we can for peace, for mutual understanding, and for learning together how to forgive. Oh, how difficult forgiveness can be! My Muslim friends try so hard to appreciate it, to want it for their lives and for their relationship with others. They say that their religion is *fudud*, meaning, not very demanding. They say that God asks everyone to forgive, but if someone cannot, God is merciful. Every day we struggle to understand and make them understand that guilt is rarely ever just on one side, but is on both sides. We work together and strive to see all that is positive in the other, to look each other in the eye, face-to-face, because we want to find the truth. My staff has learned to laugh at their limitations, at their pettiness, at their “money” mentality, at their hardness of heart, at their thirst for

vengeance when they are hurt. These things make forgiveness difficult.

On my part, over many years I have learned, or, better, I have understood in the depths of my being, that when something is not working — misunderstandings, attacks, injustices, animosity, persecution, divisions — surely the fault is mine, surely there is something I have done wrong. Seeking my fault at God's feet is easy, and it does not take long; it is painful, but not really so much, because it is good to acknowledge my faults and struggle to have my faults removed, to have my sinful behavior reformed, so that in every relationship with others my approach becomes positive.

Our task on earth is to bring life to others. Life surely does not mean condemnation, the *ius belli* (the right of war), accusation, vengeance, adding insult to injury, revealing others' wrongdoings and faults, while instead hiding our own faults, impatience, anger, jealousy, envy, lack of hope, and lack of faith in human beings. Life means to hope at all times, to hope against hope, to cast our troubles behind us, not focusing on the troubles of others, believing that there is a God and that he is a God of love. Nothing disturbs us, and we always move forward with God. Perhaps it is not easy and might even be an enormous feat to believe this way.

Of course, we need to free ourselves of so much dead weight. But there are practical methods, there are ways, there are clear indications, that God calls to us in the innermost recess of our souls. However, his voice is a small, quiet one. We have to put ourselves in a listening mode, we have to be quiet, we have to create a separate place that is quiet, even if it is often necessarily near others, and we have to be like a mother who cannot be away for too long from her children.

## **Conclusion**

Mere words? No, it is the truth and reality. Certainly, for the majority of us it will necessarily mean creating silence and quiet, turning off the phone, throwing the TV out the window, and deciding once and for all to free ourselves from our slavery to things, to what seems and is important in the eyes of the world but absolutely does not count in the eyes of God. At God's feet we rediscover every lost truth: everything that has fallen into darkness becomes light; all that was stormy has quieted down; all that seemed to have worth, but did not, appears in its true colors. And we awaken to the beauty of a life that is honest, sincere, and good, a life that deals with reality, not appearances, a life filled with goodness, a life open to others and with a strong tension toward making all human beings become united as one.

I would like to add that the little ones — the ones without a voice, those who count for nothing in the eyes of the world but count for so much in God's eyes, his beloved ones — need us, and we need to be with them and for them. And it does not matter if our actions are like a drop of water in the ocean. Jesus Christ never spoke of results. He only told us to love one another, to wash one another's feet, and to forgive at all times.

Address at the Vatican on  
December 1, 2001, Conference of the  
Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care



On October 5, 2003, around 7:00 p.m., after having made her nightly visit to the sick, Annalena Tonelli was assassinated by a gunman, shot twice in the back of the neck. A few days

earlier she had written on a sheet of paper:

Don't speak about me because that would be meaningless, but give glory to the Lord for the infinite and unspeakably great gifts he has woven into my life. And now let us all begin to serve the Lord together because up to this point we have done very little.



## **Claire de Castelbajac, Servant of God**

*“I want to be a saint, and that’s all!”*

Claire was born in Paris on Monday, October 26, 1953, the youngest of five children in the de Castelbajac family. Her first years were spent in Morocco, where she received a solid religious education. From her youth she was often sick: when she was four an acute toxicosis endangered her life, and she felt its aftermath for years. However, these difficult times never took away her smile. Claire was a young girl with an effervescent and decisive character. One day when her mother asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up, and if she might want to be a religious, little Claire answered resolutely: “I want to be a saint, and that’s all! That’s tougher than being a religious, right?” Nevertheless, she had times of discouragement in which she cried out: “I don’t want to be a saint anymore. It’s too hard.”

Her family returned to France permanently in 1959 during the bloody Years of Lead in that North African country. At the age of six, she composed a beautiful prayer that showed

her concern for others: “Jesus, make the bad people who don’t love you and who don’t know you be good and get to know you and love you, and make them pray three times a day and all get to heaven.” After her first Communion she said, “I want to be a saint, so now I need to make sacrifices.” At the age of ten, when she got sick and was at home with a high fever, she confided to her mother that she had asked to be sick “for the conversion of sinners.”

The year 1968 was marked by many social and political changes that affected the fifteen-year-old Claire. Shaken by what she was seeing and feeling, she decided to pray according to Our Lady of Fátima’s request. But that is not all! With her schoolmates, she decided to write a letter to all the bishops in France in which she asked them “to please ask the priests to convey the message of Our Lady to all their parishes.... Monsignor, we are young girls asking this of you, just as we are asking all the bishops of France, to make this appeal to the Church in our nation. We are certain that you will consider this, and we thank you.”

Given the challenges to the Church, she was so concerned and grieved that she became ill, and the next school year was entirely spent at home. Meanwhile, she organized a choir that also did theatrical performances to entertain elderly and disabled people. She was always smiling and full of contagious creativity.

After finishing secondary school and her first year at the university in Toulouse, Claire decided to apply for professional training at the Central Institute of Restoration in Rome. Happy, but at the same time frightened by this bold move, she wrote to her parents: “I am terrified at the idea that I could be admitted! I know very well that the Bible says 366 times ‘Fear not,’ so that’s one for every day of the year, and in any case grace will be with me. But I have an insane fear at the idea of

beginning my life as an adult in two months.”

Having passed the entrance exam, Claire began her life in Rome. This young beautiful foreign girl did not lack for male attention. She wrote to her parents: “What bothers me is the success I am having with boys, which, believe me, is quite involuntary. One of them is clearly in love with me, and there is a young Lebanese man full of attention for me.... I have to add two Italians who are particularly complimentary and are like ‘faithful puppies.’ I have only been here nine days, and so much has happened.... It’s true that very soon they will know me better!... It is so difficult to change one’s nature and to keep from laughing, from making a joke out of everything, and making puns all the time.... But I am assured of the protection of God, the Blessed Virgin, and Benedict [Claire was particularly devoted to Benedictine spirituality], not to mention my guardian angels.”

She missed her family and her friends: “I really need your prayers.... The more I get to know the people here, the more I get depressed. I thought that Art for Art’s sake and Beauty for Beauty’s sake, the gratuitous nature of things, would give people depth and even something more.... Evidently, except for two or three snobs, everyone is interested in and even passionate about what they are doing, but apart from that, zip! The only thing that interests them is pleasure in any form. So I find this a bit depressing and discouraging.... All the young men are running after me! My goodness! I don’t wear miniskirts at all ... and, moreover, I am a bit cold and nasty with the ones who should be avoided. The more I do that, the more they persist.... But now the one I am afraid of is myself, so I will be honest with you. I am not very encouraged by decent people at all like I was in Toulouse. Now, sometimes, when I see those who surround me, I tell myself that it might not be so bad to be like them.... So now I pray, and I pray to

have courage, I could even say to be heroic at times, to resist, to not 'be with a boy' before engagement and marriage." To avoid succumbing to temptation, Claire wrote a very short prayer: "Immaculate Mary, I entrust the purity of my heart to you; may you guard it forever."

Little by little, however, she began to succumb to the lifestyle of those around her with their philosophy of pleasure. She rented an apartment with two girlfriends; she went out at night and studied very little. Her standards were lowered and she herself admitted: "My vision of things has changed. Who can satisfy the thirst for life I am experiencing?... Yesterday we went to the seashore. It was fabulous! All alone by ourselves going wild until late at night... We were passionately full of life, independence, total freedom, and the intoxicating feeling of being away from civilization." The words of another female student, however, had the effect of a cold shower: "You will see, poor little girl, you will end up an atheist. I give you less than a year before you are just like us."

During her vacation she made a pilgrimage to Lourdes, and after starting her second year of studies she wrote to her parents, "I am now aware of how vanity and selfishness have brought me down under the false banner of emancipation." This test of faith solidified her missionary vocation: "I want to sow joy and bring happiness to everyone I meet. Little Thérèse [of Lisieux] wanted to be in heaven to make people happy, but I want to make people happy when I am on earth!"

In 1974, Claire and a group of young people went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The time she spent in the footsteps of Jesus affected her deeply: "My life is complete. My life and my perspective have completely changed in three weeks. In addition to my friendly relationship with the Blessed Virgin, I discovered the love of God, which is immense, surprising, and simple. Christian charity means loving others

because God loves them. This, among other things, is what fills me with heavenly joy. I hope I am not sounding too much like a pious nun, but I really feel full of heavenly joy.”

Returning from her pilgrimage, she received good news; she was being sent to restore the frescoes in the Basilica of Francis of Assisi. She was entrusted with the restoration of the fresco of her patron saint, Saint Claire, and then that of Saint Martin. It was an intense period of prayer and growth in her interior life because of her contact with the Benedictine monks with whom she had chosen to lodge, and she was going to Mass every day. She wanted to remain in prayer and silence. She read the writing of Charles de Foucauld; she wrote, “I am continually immersed in joy and inner peace.”

On December 18, 1974, she returned to France to celebrate the Christmas holidays. After the first of the year, she was suddenly struck down by viral meningoencephalitis. On January 17, 1975, still unconscious, she received the anointing of the sick. On Sunday, January 19, she suddenly said, although her eyes were closed, “Hail Mary, full of grace ...” Her voice trailed off, but her mother, who was at her bedside, continued the prayer. After the first Hail Mary was finished, Claire murmured, “and the next one and the next one.”

On January 20, she went into a coma and left the earth two days later on Wednesday afternoon, January 22. Her life ended just as she herself had predicted in a letter to a friend: “Do you really think that the increasing proximity of death is distressing? I don’t think so; we don’t need to fear death. Death is only the passage from a life — which is actually a simple exam — of minor joys and sorrows ... to total Happiness, to the perpetual Vision of the One who has given us everything.... Do you remember that at Sacred Heart [the religious boarding school in Toulouse she attended] several girls, and you were

among them, predicted that I would die young? And this took place without all of you conferring about this. Well, I confess that I couldn't care less, since, compared to eternity, what are fifty years or so of earthly life?"

The official investigation for the beatification of Claire de Castelbajac began in 1990; the diocesan phase was completed in 2008.

■ ■ ■  
*Part Four*

■ ■ ■

## Resources

*“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”*

— HEBREWS 4:12

***Lectio Divina, Plan A***

**Living a Healing**

**THE WORD OF GOD**

**... IS HEARD**

*Mark 3:1–5*

Again [Jesus] entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. And they watched him, to see whether he would heal him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come here.” And he said to them, “Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

**... IS MEDITATED UPON**

I like to see Jesus through the veil of the written word in the Bible. The words preserve not only a memory of him, but every time I reopen the book of the word of God I also encounter him again as the companion on the journey of my life.

Probably, the protagonist of the text we just read, the man with the withered, paralyzed hand, was at the back of the

synagogue, leaning up against the wall where no one could see his embarrassing problem. Perhaps he never went to visit anyone and did not want friends to visit him, preferring to live hidden with his handicap.

Jesus instead calls him up to the front where he could no longer hide and where everyone could see him.

When the Lord tells him to stretch out his hand, he might have stretched out his other hand, the healthy one, to avoid being derided. But he perceived in his heart that the time had come, that exceptional moment in which it was not worth hiding himself anymore. He felt that it was right to stand before the light of truth, to bring forth that part of himself that he was ashamed of, the part that his friends and the people did not want to see, the part that made him feel irremediably wounded by destiny.

The story of the man with the withered hand continues in my own life when, during prayer, Jesus asks me to offer him all my sins, when I don't feel comfortable and, when despite the love with which he speaks to me, my fear and discomfort are stronger.

It is then that I decide to free my heart, to bring forth all my sin with deep honesty, without thinking of the aftermath or of how the confessor might view me, stretching forth "my paralyzed hand" just like that man in the synagogue that day. A miracle happens: through his gentle presence, the Lord reestablishes peace in me.

Absolution brings healing and freedom. It prompts me to rediscover the value of friendship, whether with other people or with him. At different times of weakness, I would come, kneeling before him and asking for mercy. He never got tired of forgiving me with a fully understanding and magnanimous heart.

Don't confine yourself to the margins of this story as

a mere observer. The Lord Jesus is here today precisely for you. If he asks you to offer him what is paralyzed or dead in you, or what seems to you that way, offer it in the honesty of confession. You will experience a new quality of life that only he knows how to give through the ministry of his Church.

## **... IS PRAYED**

### **Prayer for Peace**

Almighty and merciful God, Father of all men, Creator and Ruler of the Universe, Lord of History, whose designs are without blemish, whose compassion for the errors of men is inexhaustible, in your will is our peace.

Mercifully hear this prayer which rises to you from the tumult and desperation of a world in which you are forgotten, in which your name is not invoked, your laws are derided and your presence is ignored. Because we do not know you, we have no peace.

From the heart of an eternal silence, you have watched the rise of empires and have seen the smoke of their downfall....

You have witnessed the impious fury of ten thousand fratricidal wars, in which great powers have torn whole continents to shreds in the name of peace and justice....

A day of ominous decision has now dawned on  
this free nation....

Save us then from our obsessions! Open our  
eyes, dissipate our confusions, teach us to  
understand ourselves and our adversary!...

Let us never forget that sins against the law of  
love are punishable by loss of faith,

And those without faith stop at no crime to  
achieve their ends!

Help us to be masters of the weapons that  
threaten to master us.

Help us to use our science for peace and plenty,  
not for war and destruction....

Save us from the compulsion to follow our  
adversaries in all that we most hate, confirming  
them in their hatred and suspicion of us.

Resolve our inner contradictions, which now  
grow beyond belief and beyond bearing.

They are at once a torment and a blessing: for if  
you had not left us the light of conscience, we  
would not have to endure them....

Teach us to wait and trust.

Grant light, grant strength and patience to all  
who work for peace....

But grant us above all to see that our ways are  
not necessarily your ways,

That we cannot fully penetrate the mystery of  
your designs

And that the very storm of power now raging  
on this earth

Reveals your hidden will and your inscrutable  
decision.

Grant us to see your face in the lightning of  
this cosmic storm,

O God of holiness, merciful to men.

Grant us to seek peace where it is truly found!

In your will, O God, is our peace.

Amen

— Thomas Merton, In the Appendix  
of *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed.  
William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad  
Publishing, 1995), pp. 328-329.

## In Praise of the Blessed Virgin

... O you, whoever you are,  
who feel that in the tidal wave of this world  
you are nearer to being tossed about among the  
squalls and gales  
than treading on dry land,  
if you do not want to founder in the tempest,  
do not avert your eyes from the brightness of  
this star.

When the wind of temptation rises within you,  
when you strike upon the rock of tribulation,  
gaze up at this star, call out to Mary.

Whether you are being tossed about  
by the waves of pride or ambition,  
or slander or jealousy,  
gaze at this star; call out to Mary.  
When rage or greed or fleshly desires are  
battering the skiff of your soul,  
gaze up at Mary.

When the immensity of your sins weighs you  
down  
and you are bewildered by the loathsomeness  
of your conscience  
when the terrifying thought of judgment  
appalls you  
and you begin to flounder in the gulf of sadness  
and despair,

think of Mary.

In dangers, in hardships, in every doubt,  
think of Mary, call out to Mary.  
Keep her in your mouth, keep her in your heart.  
Follow the example of her life,  
and you will obtain the favor of her prayer.

Following her, you will never go astray.  
Asking for her help you will never despair.  
Keeping her in your thoughts you will never  
wander away.  
With your hand in hers, you will never stumble.  
With her protecting you, you will not be afraid.  
With her leading you, you will never tire.  
Her kindness will see you through to the end.

— From St. Bernard of Clairvaux,  
“Homily 2,” in *Homilies in the Praise of  
the Blessed Virgin Mary*, trans. Marie-  
Bernard Said (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian  
Publications, 1993), p. 30

## *Lectio Divina*, Plan B

### Living a Healing

#### THE WORD OF GOD

#### ... IS HEARD

*Acts 6:8–10; 7:54–60*

And Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, arose and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.

Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God.” But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together upon him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him; and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, “Lord, do

not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

### ... IS MEDITATED UPON

We have a very specific report here. On the one hand, there is a dramatic description of the facts, presented with precision of a historical account. On the other hand, we have a story of intense emotions and an insightful analysis of interior attitudes with the language of reporting that is full of metaphors: “*they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against him, they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.*” One can clearly perceive that the author of the Acts of the Apostles is deeply and personally moved by what he is describing. The first martyr, Stephen, gives his life, marking a turning point for the Church, for the followers and the enemies of the Gospel, for a young man called Saul, and for each of us.

Stoning is a unique punishment: it allows the murderers to stand apart from their victim. It allows them not to have to touch him, to establish a physical and mental distance from the despised person, the guilty one. At the same time, however, stoning allows wounding him so much more severely. A person is killed without anyone having to have blood on their hands.

The indication of hate nevertheless always remains, like a thorn in one’s heart. The young man named Saul knows that well. Perhaps for the first time in his life Saul, looking on at the mystery of martyrdom — at the testimony of the young Stephen — senses he himself has a heart of stone and begins to have some questions because of feeling ashamed.

Stephen’s personality is very significant. He is so “easy to read,” so Christian, so evangelical, and it is so clear that his

accusers cannot stand his mere presence: they close their ears and chase him outside the city. They want him gone not only from their religious space (the synagogue) but also from their social space (the city).

The people in the synagogue have their hearts set in their convictions. They are so devout and zealous that, out of love for the law, they are ready to kill. If they had only looked up to heaven, they would have seen the same thing as Stephen: instead of their narrow perspective on death, they would have seen that heaven brings happiness. Stephen takes the same “form” as Jesus did on Mount Tabor, which leads him to fix his eyes on the opened heavens and to hear the voice of the Father — the same voice as at Golgotha when Jesus forgave his tormentors: *Lord, do not hold this sin against them*. In fact, it is in forgiving that we always become more like Our Lord. This is the absolutely essential condition of being Christian according to the Lord’s Prayer: *forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors*.

I am exposed to attacks today as well. Stones are being thrown in my direction by accusers and persecutors. I am aware, however, that I, too, am capable of casting stones and of taking a life. On the one hand, I want to keep looking up at heaven to see the glory of God and you, Lord, seated at the right hand of the Father. On the other hand, I fix my gaze on earthy things, on things that I would like to have, and that I am not able to give up, not even a little bit.

“Saul” struggles daily in my life with “Stephen.” And the outcomes of these battles are never certain. St. Paul also encountered the same paradox and wrote: *“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand”* (Rom 7:15,19,21). And then he

cries out in desperation: “*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*” (Rom 7:24). The answer to that question, however, rises up instantly in his heart: “*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” (Rom 7:25).

It is the free gift of your forgiveness, O Lord, that frees me from the evil I do. And I thank you for having paid the debt of my sins for me with your death and your cross, and for having opened the heavens for me through your resurrection!

### ... IS PRAYED

#### **Canticle of Zechariah (Lk 1:68–79)**

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has visited and redeemed his people,

and has raised up a horn of salvation for us  
in the house of his servant David,

as he spoke by the mouth  
of his holy prophets from of old,

that we should be saved from our enemies,  
and from the hand of all who hate us;

to perform the mercy promised to our fathers,  
and to remember his holy covenant,

the oath which he swore to our father Abraham,  
to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of  
our enemies,

might serve him without fear, in holiness and  
righteousness  
before him all the days of our life.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most  
High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

to give knowledge of salvation to his people  
in the forgiveness of their sins,

through the tender mercy of our God,  
when the day shall dawn upon us from on high

to give light to those who sit in darkness  
and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet  
into the way of peace.



Immaculate Mary,  
We turn to you with filial affection.  
Enlighten, guide, and  
rescue the humanity redeemed by Christ,  
your Son and our Brother!  
Call those who are far off,  
convert sinners,  
sustain the suffering,  
help and comfort  
those who already know you and love you!

*Resources*

“Glorious things are spoken of you, O Mary,  
for from you arose the sun of justice,  
Christ our God.”

— Pope John Paul II, Angelus,  
December 8, 1991