

## DAY 3: TAKING CUSTODY OF YOUR THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS



Let's open with prayer:

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

*Lord Jesus Christ, only say the word and my soul shall be healed.*

*Amen.*

**L**ET'S REMIND OURSELVES of the themes of our first two days:

Day 1: God is in control and we should have complete trust in God's perfect plan for our life. This should be very comforting. But most of us run into a difficulty, as we saw in Day 2.

Day 2: Our greatest hurdle is our desire for control. We need to relinquish that control by trusting the past to God's mercy, the future to His providence and the present to His love. We looked at specific ways to practice each.

Our effort to give control back to God is often thwarted by feelings and emotions. Rather than supporting our good intentions, they work against us.

For the next three days we will look at specific, actionable and

effective ways to reorder our interior life so that it becomes natural to let go of anger from the past, fear of the future and doubt in present trials, and experience more and more of the peace that comes from giving control to God.

## **THOSE TROUBLING EMOTIONS**

On this retreat we'll use "emotions" to include passions, feelings and desires. Our emotions are a great gift- imagine life without them! But they can be troublesome. Let's take the case of worries. We often hear the words of Padre Pio, "Pray, hope and don't worry." But getting ourselves not to worry can be very difficult. The feelings well up from deep within us. However, Padre Pio and Christ himself would not give this advice if they didn't know it was within our grasp.

We encounter the same emotional hurdle with wounds and forgiveness. Even when we seek and offer forgiveness, feelings of regret and resentment remain and rob us of happiness.

Happiness and feelings. Like Clorox and ammonia, or clowns and Halloween, they are a bad combination. We often associate "happiness" with "good feelings." That's where everything goes off the rails.

## **EMOTIONS EXPLAINED**

God is pure spirit. We, however, are body and spirit – we are spiritual beings enfleshed in a physical body. We are made in God's image and likeness in our spiritual powers of intellect and will. Our intellect gives us the ability to know the things of God. Our will gives us the ability to freely act on that knowledge – to make good choices and see them through.

But because of the fall, our intellect is darkened (we don't readily understand God's truths), our will is weakened (we don't make good

choices, or see them through) and our emotions are disordered (we desire bad things and our feelings override our intellect and our will).

Our emotions (feelings, passions and desires) while a gift from God, exist as part of our bodily nature, which we share with animals. But human emotions are much deeper than those of an animal, and when functioning well, our emotions can penetrate deep into our soul. In fact, many human experiences are “too deep for words” and are most fully captured through our feelings. What’s more, our emotions help us experience empathy and they give value to our thoughts and actions (we don’t, or at least shouldn’t, have the same emotional response to holding a new gadget as we do to holding a baby).

Our emotions, particularly in the sense of passion and desire, are what move us toward God and Godly things. Think of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, when they realize they had just been in the presence of Christ, and declare “were our hearts not *burning*?” Think of the apostles after Pentecost, they are *on fire* for the Lord to the point of being marked by flame.

So we must reclaim and reorder our emotions, by God’s grace.

## **EMOTIONS AND HAPPINESS**

As noted in Day 2, authentic happiness is the same as holiness – living a life of love for God and neighbor. When we understand and experience happiness in this way we find happiness even amidst suffering. This is because we accept suffering as part of God’s plan for our life, and we recognize that He will bring good from it. In that knowledge and trust in God, we find a certain type of happiness.

The challenge arises when we believe we have a better plan for our happiness than God’s plan. This takes us back to yesterday’s discussion about our hunger for control – it is a recipe for disaster if we try to act on our plan for our life instead of God’s. When we fail to surrender ourselves to God’s plan and instead, clutch at control,

in come control's constant companions – the powerful emotions of worry, doubt and fear.

## THE SOLUTION

We have very little control over our fallen and disordered emotions (at least at first). In fact, for most of us the danger is that our emotions control us. So our emotions have to be trained. Like my dog. Or else they are unruly and unmanageable. Like my dog. But while my unruly dog is still cute at the end of the day, there's nothing cute about unruly emotions.

Let's return to "Pray, hope and don't worry."

Most people can muster up prayer when needed. And most people can find some measure of hope (it's a grave situation indeed for people who have lost all hope – that's a topic for another day, but everything in this session will also increase hope).

Most people struggle with "don't worry." It is a terrible thing to be stuck in the cycle of praying, but still feeling the worry. And then praying more. But the worry remains. Then discouragement sets in.

The struggle arises because the feeling of worry just wells up from within. We can't simply "tell ourselves not to worry" any more than we can tell ourselves "don't think about an elephant."

We must train ourselves not to worry, as well as not to fear or doubt in God.

How do we do that?

By letting God transform us.

Okay ... and how do we do that? We will look at two tried-and-true approaches:

1. Taking custody of our thoughts and emotions.

## 2. Uniting our worries, wounds and trials to Christ in meditation

Today we will look at taking custody.

### **TAKING CUSTODY OF OUR THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS**

Even though emotions tend to well up in us, unbidden, that doesn't mean we must be a slave to them, leaving them to come and go and toss us about like a rudderless ship in a stormy sea. We can influence and train our emotions, thoughts, and imaginings. This, again, is our one healthy exercise of control – exercising our free will to control how we respond in the present moment.

Our guides are St. Ignatius and Dietrich von Hildebrand.

St. Ignatius was the founder of the Jesuit order and the spiritual giant of the counter-reformation. St. Ignatius is also a Saint of practical living. He teaches a simple three-part approach to discernment in everyday life: Be Aware, Assess and Take Action.

The key to St. Ignatius' deceptively simple 3-part discernment, is that we must do it in the company of the Holy Spirit. As new things come at us (which is almost constant these days) we should be always calling on the Holy Spirit to help us Be Aware, Assess and Take Action.

Dietrich von Hildebrand was a leading 20th century philosopher who was instrumental in giving serious attention to the proper role of emotions in human flourishing. Von Hildebrand's insights can be used to build on St. Ignatius' practical discernment - showing how to apply it to our emotions. Von Hildebrand advises that we should use our intellect and will to influence our emotions. We should sanction valid, healthy emotions and disavow disordered emotions. This is how Ignatian discernment plays out with Hildebrand's emotional control (the same principles apply to guiding our thoughts, memories, and imagination):

#### 1. Be Aware: Be alert for when you are having a strong emotional

response. This can be trickier than it sounds. When our emotions flare up our intellect and reason tend to shut down. It takes practice, discipline, and God's grace, to catch ourselves in the middle of an emotional outburst.

2. Assess: Is your emotional response to a specific situation rational? Is it the proper emotion and in the proper degree? Pray to the Holy Spirit for illumination and self-knowledge.
3. Take Action: If the emotion is a healthy response, sanction it. If the emotion is improper or disproportionate, then it is time to disavow. Pray for the grace to act decisively and see it through.

*Disavow* is a powerful word. Avow is based on the Latin word *advocare*, which means “to summon.” So to disavow is to “un-summon,” if you will. We don’t simply reject the unruly emotion; we make it known that it is unwanted and we seek to undo whatever is inside of us that summoned the unwanted visitor in the first place by practicing an opposing emotion.

*Sanction* is also a carefully chosen word. Let’s look at three aspects of its meaning of “sanction.”

First, sanction can mean to “authoritatively approve.” We don’t simply accept healthy emotions. We authoritatively approve of them – we evaluate them as they occur and only allow them to proceed if they are a valid response to our circumstances. In this way we are truly taking authority over our emotions – we’re not just a passive spectator as they play out through us. At the same time, we make sure they pass through unharmed. “Tough guys” who aren’t willing to show emotion are failing to sanction their emotions just as much as “drama queens” who let everything through the filter.

Second, sanction can mean to “decree or ordain.” If an emotional response is missing, we decree it. A simple example is a sunset or sunrise. We should be in awe each time we see one. Imagine for a moment, that someone walked up to you with the original Mona

Lisa and told you that you had 5 minutes to take it in before it would be destroyed. It would be repainted again, but it would not be the same. That is exactly what the divine artist does with every sunrise and sunset – each one a masterpiece. Each one never repeated. All of us fall into the habit of being barely aware of them. In fact, we should feel awe and wonder each time we take one in. We should “decree” that emotional response.

Third, and most important, sanction is connected to the Latin *sanctio* – to make sacred. Our emotions elevate our humanity. Look at the example of King David returning the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, “he came dancing before the Lord with abandon, as he and all the Israelites were bringing up the ark with shouts of joy and to the sound of the horn.” Every healthy, well-ordered emotion strengthens our soul and elevates our mind and heart to God.

This process can also be done after the fact. Indeed, it’s very effective to do this as a “postmortem,” by looking back on an emotional event with the benefit of time, and objectivity, and assess our response. Subsequently we can determine what we might do differently in the future, putting in place a plan to do just that.

When we take custody of our emotions, thoughts and imagination – they are no longer random bursts from within, like some interior invading army. Instead, we make them truly our own. Von Hildebrand words it that there is a marriage between our intellect, our will and our emotions.

That is the ideal of interior harmony.

Of course, this process shouldn’t exist in a vacuum. It is most effective when we’re working to order all of our life to God through prayer and growing in virtue and service to neighbor.

## TAKING CUSTODY OF WORRY

The process described above works for healing and reordering all our emotional states. As an example, let's look at how it specifically applies to worry.

Worry and imagination work hand-in-hand. Sometimes, when faced with something unpleasant, a general uneasiness creeps up within us and then our imagination takes it from there. Other times our imagination takes the lead by inventing disastrous future scenarios that fill us with worry and dread. Take financial worries as an example, with the scenario of the breadwinner of the household losing his job. That is a serious matter, no doubt about it. There may be sorrow for the lost job and a reasonable level of concern about what the future will hold and what course of action to take. This type of concern is a perfectly valid response – in fact, it is the virtue of prudence in action. But let's say despite having reasonable savings and good prospects for securing a new job, the spouses start envisioning all manner of terrible outcomes; foreclosure on their home, a medical emergency or natural disaster arising, wiping out all of their retirement? What started as a reasonable response to an unwelcome event (loss of a job) has now morphed into paralyzing fear.

Following the “be aware, assess and act” paradigm, the couple would recognize when their emotions and imaginings began transitioning from valid concern to irrational fear. Then they would use their intellect to dispel the irrational imaginings of foreclosure and bankruptcy and to remind themselves that God has a plan for their lives and will not lead them into disaster. By doing this they are disavowing an irrational emotion, fear, by practicing an opposing emotion, courage (in the form of trusting God).

That's an idealized example, but you can see how it applies to real life events.

How do you know rational sadness and concern from irrational fear? Here are some indicators of irrational fear – if it is caused by

the anticipation of an event that may never happen. If it robs you of peace. If it leads you into discouragement. Worst of all if it leads you to despair of God. And it is irrational fear if it only leads to more worry, rather than acceptance, productive activity, or healing.

How about telling the difference between righteous anger and sinful rage? Righteous anger is always directed toward turning things to God, rather than seeking personal retribution. Righteous anger should always be measured and rational. It is not a response in the heat of the moment. We may be called to act in the moment, but if we sense that we're acting out of the passion of rage rather than the thought of bringing justice, then we should disengage and quickly pray to the Holy Spirit for wisdom and self-control.

As far as doubt goes, there is no “healthy” version of doubting in God. When in the midst of a trial we can certainly question ourselves – we can be prayerfully deliberative to make sure we're properly listening and responding to God. But we should never doubt God's goodness and always work to overcome doubt with Trust.

A critical component of taking custody of our emotions is that we must be united with God throughout. Our fallen imagination and emotions are too powerful for us on our own. It is only by God's grace that our mind is illumined, and our will strengthened so that we can see the truth in each situation and take action, fortified by faith in God's loving plan for our life.

## **CLOSING**

Reordering our fallen emotions is not an instantaneous matter. Though by God's grace, you can make tremendous progress in short order.

There is much more to be said about our fallen emotions and Interior Life will be providing a “booster shot” for this vaccination, in which we'll look deeper at how this all works.

## SPIRITUAL TAKE-AWAYS FOR DAY 3

Because of the fall, our intellect is darkened, our will weakened and our emotions disordered.

Our disordered emotions (passions and feelings) are instrumental in how we are derailed by worries, wounds and trials. Our emotions are disordered because they attract us to wrong things and they work with our memories and imagination to overwhelm our intellect and our will. We can tame and reorder our emotions by taking custody of them.

We must rely on the Holy Spirit and practice being *aware* to our emotional responses, so that we can *assess* them. Then we *act* - if they are appropriate, we sanction them, if not we disavow them.

Let's close in prayer-

*Heavenly Father, thank you for your love for me and your plan for my life. Please raise up in my mind and heart what you desire for me from this day of the retreat. Amen.*