

# 5 DAYS TO CHRISTIAN

## SPIRITUAL VACCINATION

BECOME IMMUNE TO FUTURE WORRIES and PAST  
WOUNDS, and FIND PEACE AMIDST TRIALS THROUGH  
CHRIST and the CHRISTIAN MYSTIC TRADITION

STEVEN J. SMITH

5-DAYS TO  
**CHRISTIAN**  
SPIRITUAL VACCINATION

BECOME IMMUNE to FUTURE WORRIES and PAST WOUNDS,  
and FIND PEACE AMIDST TRIALS THROUGH CHRIST and the  
CHRISTIAN MYSTIC TRADITION

STEVEN J. SMITH

Copyright © 2021 by Steven J. Smith

All rights reserved.

This ebook version is a gift specifically for friends and supporters of the Truth fo Health Foundation and not for sale or distribution.

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, digital, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law, without the prior permission of the author.

Scripture texts in this work are typically from the New American Bible, revised edition © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Spiritual Vaccination is a Trademark of Interior Life and Inspiring Songs, LLC

<https://interiorlife.app>

ISBN: 978-1-7358184-2-9

# **5 Days to Christian Spiritual Vaccination – Table of Contents**

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Retreat Opening .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Day 1: “Who’s In Charge Here?” - Learning to Trust God’s Perfect Plan for Your Life .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Day 2: “Control Freak? Who, Me?” - Learning to Let Go of Your Plan for Happiness Because God’s is Better .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Day 3: Healthy Control I - Taking Custody of Your Thoughts and Emotions .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Day 4: Healthy Control II - Uniting Your Worries, Wounds and Trials with Christ Through Meditation .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Day 5: The One Thing That Matters Most (because everything else matters too).....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Daily Summaries .....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Retreat Closing .....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Suggested References .....</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>About the Author .....</b>	<b>74</b>





## INTRODUCTION

**W**ELCOME TO THE Spiritual Vaccination 5-day Retreat! I'm so pleased you are taking part in this retreat and am certain the Holy Spirit will respond to your gift of time and presence by creating in you an immunity to the experiences in life that rob you of peace and purpose.

Jesus warns us, "do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna." (Mt 10:28)

We need to take care of our body and our soul ...

... let's reverse that.

We need to take care of our soul and our body.

If we don't get our spiritual health in order, we won't make good choices for our physical health or the needs of others. It's akin to the message we hear on every airplane, "put your oxygen mask on first before helping others." So it is with our spiritual soul and our body. We can't properly attend to our bodily needs, let alone to the needs of others, if our spirit is failing.

And there is much in the world and in our life that is actively at

work to disrupt our spirit. But there is good news – we have direct access to the Divine Physician – the Healer of our souls.

As with bodily health care, our spiritual healing will go much faster and smoother if we cooperate with our Physician.

That's what this 5-day retreat is all about. You will finish your time on retreat with a clear understanding of our shared spiritual affliction. You will learn how to recognize the symptoms that are specific to you, and most importantly, how to cooperate with God so he can do His good work to heal and harmonize your interior so you can live the life for which you were created.

May God richly bless your time on this retreat –

Steve



## RETREAT OPENING

**T**HIS RETREAT ORIGINATED March 2020 as a series of Interior Life podcast episodes to help people grapple with the effects of the coronavirus pandemonium and cultural upheaval. But the principles of that original series apply to all of life's challenges. And so, we have created for you this completely new virtual retreat to inoculate you against fear, anger, resentment, and discouragement.

But first we need to cover some basics so that you are able to make the most of this five-day journey with Christ.

### **YOU ARE ON RETREAT**

You are entering into a five-day retreat to grow in faith, to grow in knowledge of God and to grow in self-knowledge so that, like St. Peter, you can focus on Christ and rise above the churning and chaotic events of life.

For the next five days you are on a retreat. This means you are separating yourself from the world. I know you have all your worldly responsibilities and activities and concerns, but amidst all of that you have decided to set apart this daily time for God, which is a wonderful thing. You will get the most out of this retreat if you endeavor to separate from the noise of the world (internet, TV, social media, etc)



and spend daily time in silent meditation. If you're not certain how to do that, we have a simple starting point for you in the postscript to today's session.

## **LANDSCAPE OF THIS RETREAT**

This retreat is eminently practical. Each day will provide specific, actionable, and effective steps you can take to grow your interior life and become immune to worries, wounds and trials.

If need be, you can spread out the days of the retreat, for example over five weeks (one day of retreat per week); but you want to make sure you are able to maintain the continuity of the retreat – each day is meant to build on the day prior.

Today we look at why we should have complete trust in God. Tomorrow we look at our fallen nature and how it leads us astray and thwarts our trust in God. On Days 3 and 4 we look at specific ways that, by God's grace, we can transform our fallen nature so that we are no longer fighting with ourselves. On Day 5 we will look at additional approaches to immunize ourselves against worries, wounds and trials and the importance of Christian meditation to remain immunized and continue a lifelong journey with Christ.

## **YOU, AT THE END OF THIS RETREAT**

The intended outcome of this retreat is for you to be spiritually prepared to respond to whatever trials and hardships may come your way. You will be able to brush aside baseless worries and fears and put aside regrets and resentment. When legitimate trials come your way you will be inoculated, so to speak, against despair and armed with spiritual resources to find your strength in God; to find meaning in the midst of hardship and to hold on to hope for the future.

## **You, RIGHT Now**

If you are currently in a time of relative ease and tranquility, then this is the perfect time to prepare and store up for the unknown future. Trials are an inevitable part of life.

If, on the other hand, you are in the midst of navigating hardship, first and foremost our hearts go out to you – we perpetually hold participants of this retreat in our prayers for you to prevail through God's strength. If you feel like you are barely hanging on, then please trust that Jesus brought you to this retreat – to ease your burden. The principles in this retreat will help you hold fast to God, to experience His consolation, and to trust and follow Him along your path forward.

However, if you feel as if you are at the end of your rope, you should also seek support from a wise spiritual guide (pray for guidance from the Holy Spirit and perhaps start by seeking someone through your Church) and also consider seeking a professional, faith-based counselor.

With those opening comments, the one thing that is certain is that God has a specific and personal grace that He desires just for you from this retreat. So, let us now turn to Day 1 ...

## DAY 1: “WHO’S IN CHARGE HERE?” LEARNING TO TRUST GOD’S PERFECT PLAN FOR YOUR LIFE



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.*

**W**ELCOME TO DAY 1 of our Spiritual Vaccination™ retreat!  
Our opening prayer, derived from Matthew 8:8, reminds us of two important realities - true healing comes from Christ, and the most important healing is the healing of our soul.

This retreat is a Spiritual Vaccination against the ill effects of worries, wounds and trials. These are, first and foremost, spiritual illnesses – which is why we seek a spiritual vaccination. If they take hold of us, they will quickly metastasize and attack our emotional and physical health, which is why we need to heal them at the source.

This retreat originated as a series of Interior Life podcast episodes to help people grapple with the effects of the coronavirus pandemic and cultural upheaval. But the principles of that original series apply to all of life's challenges. And so, we have created for you this completely new virtual retreat to inoculate you against fear, anger, resentment, and discouragement.

## **WORRIES, WOUNDS AND TRIALS**

In this retreat we'll use the terms "worries", "wounds" and "trials" to capture three distinct experiences, tied to three specific time frames, that work against the life God desires for us:

**Worries:** set in the future and fueled by our imagination – these are anxieties and other distress caused by fear of imagined and potential future events.

**Wounds:** set in our past and fueled by our memories – these are anger, resentment and regret caused by memories of our own failings, setbacks and injuries inflicted by others.

**Trials:** set in the present, these are actual tribulations, challenges, crises and other sources of suffering that, if we're not careful, can lead to doubt in God's goodness.

There will be overlap between these. For example, if we are going in for a serious medical procedure, that is a very real trial. But our imagination will seize on it and create all manner of worries about negative outcomes that may never come to pass. Or, our imagination may exaggerate the memory of a past health problem. Nevertheless, worries, wounds and trials are distinct experiences causing unique interior responses. It is powerful to name and understand them, and in doing so we can overcome them by God's grace.

Note that this retreat does not directly address conditions such as clinical depression and anxiety disorders that may require psychiatric treatment or other professional intervention.

## **FEAR, ANGER, AND DOUBT - THE ENEMIES OF YOUR PEACE AND HAPPINESS IN THE PRESENT**

Our worries for the future cripple us with fear. Our wounds from the past cripple us with anger and resentment. And present trials can cause us to despair – to doubt God's power and goodness.

Now, there are constructive forms of fear and anger. Healthy fear protects us from danger, for example by making us careful when working near a stove top for fear of getting burned. And righteous anger is the only valid response to sin and evil (“hate the sin, love the sinner”).

But there is a great deal of fear in our life that is poisonous, paralyzing, and destructive to our peace and ability to flourish. This is the groundless fear that robs us of our future by binding us with despair and hopelessness.

The archetype of this fear is the great example of Peter the Apostle walking on water. When he looks ahead to Jesus, he walks over the waves. When he looks down at the churning water, he becomes fearful and begins to sink.

In a similar way, anger binds us and distracts us from God. In fact, the first time anger is explicitly mentioned in the bible is when the Lord rejects Cain’s sacrifice and we are told “So Cain was very angry, and his face fell.” (Gen 4:5) Cain looks away from God in anger, just as Peter looked away from Christ in fear.

And the archetype of doubt is demonstrated in Christ’s return to his home village of Nazareth. His family and neighbors did not believe in Him; because of their familiarity with Him they were closed to recognizing the truth that He was the Messiah and “He did not work many mighty deeds there because of their lack of faith.” Everywhere else Jesus performed many, many healings. Certainly there were many in Nazareth that had great need of healing at that very moment, but their doubt closed them off to Jesus’ power. So too, when we doubt in God, we close ourselves from receiving His grace.

A key ingredient in our vaccination is Trust. And that is the focus of this first day of the retreat.

## OUR OPENING QUESTION

“Who’s in charge here?”

Such a common phrase. We hear it on TV, in movies, in our everyday lives. So, Who really is in charge here? You can guess where this is going, but it merits reflection because some aspects of the answer aren’t so obvious.

The basic answer, of course - “God is.” God is always in charge. God is in charge and has a plan for good for you.

*For I know well the plans I have in mind for you declares the Lord. Plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope. (Jer 29:11)*

But for many people, and at one time or another for each of us, it can ring hollow to simply acknowledge that “God is in control.” We find that even if we acknowledge “God is in charge,” it’s at the surface level - it doesn’t penetrate deep into our heart. We don’t have any real peace or confidence in the thought that God is calling the shots. It seems there is a giant gorilla on our back and nothing on heaven or earth can keep it from tormenting us.

We are going to look at three ways we can cultivate trust in God – because trust in God is exactly what we need so His sovereignty is not some vague philosophical observation but part of the bedrock of our life no matter what our circumstances may be in the present moment.

## TRUST IN GOD – FROM THEOLOGY

For starters, it will help to remind ourselves how God controls things. There are two aspects of God’s will – that which He permits, and that which He perfectly ordains. In a childish analogy (literally) we can think of the parent-child relationship. I can remember wanting another piece of candy, and another, and another. On occasion (a very rare occasion) I was allowed to indulge that sweet tooth, at the

expense of a sour stomach. That was mom's permissive will in action. She permitted me to follow my desire for candy hyper-consumption (and face the consequences). Other times it was mom's "perfect will" in action, orchestrating events so that there would be no unfettered access to candy.

Of course there are much more grave and severe examples of how this plays out in life. Little more so than the betrayal of Judas. God permitted Judas' exercise of free will, but God ordained the resurrection of His only Son that would be the ultimate resolution of that betrayal.

Thus is the understanding of how a loving and merciful God permits bad things to happen – He allows the realities of our fallen nature, and the fallen world around us, to play out. We suffer natural disasters, physical ailments and broken relationships. That is God's permissive will in action.

Other times God ordains events in our life. Sometimes we're aware of this – those "coincidences" that aren't, or the times we have a strong interior prompting from the Holy Spirit. Most times we're not even aware of the events that God is orchestrating.

The lynch pin in the whole operation is that God is always in control, and always bringing good from the trials that He permits.

That said, in the midst of trials it can be very hard for us to see where the "good" comes in. God tells us three important things:

1. "In the world you will face troubles." This goes hand-in-hand with "take up your cross." In other words, no one gets through this life unscathed.
2. "God works all things to the good for those who love him." Whatever trials we face, even the most crushing hardships, God turns them all to good - so long as we love Him; so long as we give ourselves over to Him as best as we are able.
3. "My ways are not your ways." Much of what we encounter in

this life will remain a mystery to us – the balancing of God’s permissive and perfect will with our free will – but our understanding isn’t necessary, only our trust.

And so we are challenged to trust that God is in control in the middle of a crisis – He’s right there keeping everything in balance. He is constantly and perfectly making whatever adjustments and calibrations are necessary to work each new event, flare-up, or out-right conflagration, work for our ultimate good.

In fact, the same scripture passage that tells us God works all things to the good for those who love him, continues with, “What will separate us from the love of Christ?” (Romans 8:34) St. Paul is asking a rhetorical question, because no external thing can separate us from the love of Christ. The only thing that can separate us from Christ’s love is ourselves, through our lack of faith. If we place all our trust in Christ, we are invincible, through Him.

This type of complete trust is difficult for us. That is why God has given us many examples to shore up our doubts.

## **TRUST IN GOD – FROM SCRIPTURE**

“Trust in God alone” is a prevailing theme of Sacred Scripture. We are given nearly endless examples, both positive and negative. Here are some notable ones, starting with the Old Testament.

Adam and Eve: they failed to trust in God and were banished from the Garden. Even then, God remained faithful and provided for them.

Abraham: trusted in God to the point of being willing to sacrifice his precious son, Isaac. For this he became the father of many nations.

Joshua: trusted in the Lord and guided his army to take up horns instead of weapons and march around Jericho seven times in as many



## Day 1

days and the walls came down. And he then went on to conquer all the Holy Land in the name of God.

Rahab: trusted in the Lord by assisting Joshua's men and saved the lives of her family.

Ruth: in an interesting twist, Ruth was a gentile woman of great virtue. In response to her virtuousness, she was blessed by God with the gift of great faith, marriage into Jewish royalty and became part of the royal line of David and Christ.

Hannah: trusted in the Lord and was blessed with a son, Samuel, who would become a great, and final, Judge of Israel.

David: a complex figure – he trusted in the Lord, conquered Goliath, survived Saul's jealousy, and became a great king. He also succumbed to lust and pride and fell from grace. But he again trusted and threw himself upon God's mercy and established a monarchy from which would come the Messiah.

Solomon: his trust in the Lord led him to become the wisest and more prosperous of all of Israel's kings. But in pride his trust turned inward, to his own wealth and power, and when that failed to satisfy he declared "all is vanity!"

Ezra and Nehemiah: trusted in the Lord and rebuilt Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile.

Tobit and Sarah: each suffered great misfortune, but maintained their trust in God. Through God's goodness, and many amazing events, they were brought to good fortune and a happy end.

Job: the quintessential story of trust amidst hardship. Through Job, God demonstrates that He is God. His ways are not our ways. He will always bring good from evil if we trust in Him.

Israelites: as a nation they lived out the ebb and flow of doubting in God (for which they are left wandering in the desert, led by corrupt kings and exiled by enemies) and trusting in God (leading to times of

great prosperity and being favored to be God's chosen people to go out and redeem the world)

Let's turn to the New Testament. Jesus' message of salvation is to "repent and believe." This type of belief in God is more than just a feeble belief that God exists. It is deep and vibrant belief in Him, in His goodness and His plan for our life.

Mary: Mary's "fiat," saying yes to God's plan for her, is the great act of trust that undoes Eve's act of pride in the Garden.

Woman with a hemorrhage: in trust she reaches out and touches Jesus cloak, is healed, and told by Jesus that her faith has saved her (Mt 9:22)

Ten Lepers: Jesus heals 10 lepers, but to the one who returns to give thanks He responds, "your faith has saved you." (Lk 17:19)

Centurion: Jesus is "amazed" at the faith the Centurion has in Jesus's ability to save his servant - "only say the word and my servant will be healed." Mt 8:13

Canaanite Woman: she is determined that Jesus can heal her daughter (possessed by demons) even when Jesus at first appears resistant. When she persists in her pleading, Jesus commends her great faith. (Mt 15:28)

Blind Bartimaeus: aware that Jesus is passing by persists in begging for a miracle. Jesus restores his sight telling him that his faith has saved him. (Mk 10:52)

In these examples we see people in desperate situations, without hope, until Jesus comes into their life. They place complete trust in Him, and miracles follow. Note that the greater miracle is their salvation.

The opposite also holds true. We see Jesus unable to perform miracles where faith is absent:

Family at Nazareth: when Jesus returns home to Nazareth, He is unable to work many miracles because of their lack of faith. (Mt 13:58)

The Apostles and the Storm at Sea: the apostles, in the boat with Jesus, are being tossed by the storm at sea. They are certain that they are about to perish (that was their exact word). They even had Jesus right there – in the boat with them – but in abject terror they gave no thought to that, only to what seemed like certain doom. And then, as is always the case, Jesus demonstrates that He is in complete control. He calms the storm raging at sea. He calms the storm raging in their hearts.

We saved the two greatest (and closely related) biblical stories of trust for last.

Moses and the Exodus: The Israelites were seemingly trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea (or Pharaoh's army and the Red Sea, as it were). They were certain they would perish. Here's a particularly pithy passage illustrating the Israelites hysteria and fury at Moses as Pharaoh is bearing down: "Were there no burial places in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness?" Who can blame them? By human standards, the odds were stunningly good that they would be mowed down by Pharaoh. But God was in charge. He had already given them His signs again and again (e.g. the 10 plagues). They had only to trust. Moses trusted on their behalf and the Red Sea was parted.

Jesus and His Passion: For all eternity the greatest example of God's trustworthiness is Christ's passion and resurrection. The greatest suffering and defeat transformed into the greatest triumph.

Person upon person upon person, and even Christ himself, persevered and were saved from seemingly hopeless situations. Why so many stories, why so many life examples? Because God knows us and knows that we need this reassurance to carry us through our own trials.

These biblical examples teach us not only that we must trust in

God, but that the greater the trial, the greater the deliverance. If you are suffering a great trial, trust that God will bring even greater good from it.

## **TRUST IN GOD – FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

The God that we know from theology, the God we encounter in Scripture is the same God we encounter in our own lives and through the lives of others.

Most people have had the experience of being in fear of a dreadful outcome. Perhaps it was related to a serious medical diagnosis, or a financial catastrophe, or a crisis in a relationship. In time, and through faith in God, the actual outcome was not at all what was feared. That's not to say the trial wasn't challenging, but it also was not the end of the story.

Have you experienced that? If so, go back to that, in prayer, and experience it anew. Remind yourself of that reality.

If not, look to examples from other people you know. Or look into the lives of these modern day people who met tremendous challenges with faith and joy: Chiara Corbella Petrillo, Carlo Acutis, or Nick Vujicic. Chiara and Carlo both suffered from fatal illnesses but lived life thoroughly and joyfully. Nick, a man born without arms and legs, continues to live a life of joy and meaning. Similarly, all of the Saints overcame great trials – that's how they became Saints.

## **SPIRITUAL TAKE-AWAYS FOR DAY 1**

God alone has the perfect plan for your happiness. As part of His plan He permits us to experience hardships, but He will always draw good from it if you trust in Him.

Fear, anger and doubt are great enemies of faith. Fear of the future, anger and regret from the past, and doubt in present trials paralyze us, so that we are not receptive to God's work in our life.

Day 1

Search out those examples from your life, or from scripture, or from the lives of Saints or other inspirational figures, that remind you of God's goodness and that He will deliver you from any trial you face.

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.*

DAY 2: “CONTROL FREAK? WHO ME?”  
LEARNING TO LET GO OF YOUR PLAN  
FOR HAPPINESS BECASUE GOD’S IS  
BETTER



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.*

**W**HAT IS THE hardest thing to give up? Money? Possessions? Position? Success? We can tell from the title – the hardest thing for most people to give up is *control*. This thirst for control disrupts our relationship with God and His perfect plan for our life. But what exactly is it we want to control? The answer is not always what it seems. We're going to look at surprising facets of our desire to be in control and how it relates to an important question – *How do we love God?*

## **REVIEW FROM DAY 1 – GOD IS IN CONTROL**

Recall from Day 1 that God is in control. God has a plan for your happiness, even amidst trials. It's important that we do our part to reinforce in our mind that God really will bring good from the trials of life. We must deeply interiorize this reality for it to sustain us during hardships. We looked at three ways that we can better understand and trust in God's plan for our happiness.

First, theology teaches, based on divine revelation, that God permits trials and challenges in life (His permissive will), but He also ordains good things to come from challenges for those who love Him (His perfect will). Trusting in God's goodness is at the heart of the Gospel message – which is Christ's core message to “repent and believe.” Specifically, to believe in God's goodness, ever-presence and omnipotence; and to trust in His plan for your life.

Second, the Old and New Testaments gives nearly endless examples of people who were saved from seemingly hopeless situations and overcame flaws, failures and misfortune by trusting in God's faithfulness.

And third, we can all point to situations in our lives, from the lives of the Saints, and of others, that seemed hopeless, but where good was ultimately brought from trials and suffering.

In a perfect world this should be the end of our retreat. We've established that God is in control and that is a good thing because His plan for our life is perfect – there is not a single thing we can do to improve upon it, even at those times when it's not to our liking (“My ways are not your ways”). But we live in a fallen world with our fallen nature which makes it difficult to curb our craving for control and turn our lives over to God.

Today we will look at how our worries drive our desire to control the future, how we attempt to control the past through our anger and resentment, and how our desire to control our present circumstances blind us to God's goodness amidst trials.

## **THE KEY TO THIS RETREAT**

The key to all of this was well-said by St. Augustine: “Trust the past to God’s mercy, the present to God’s love, and the future to God’s providence.”

Let’s take a close look at each of these three time frames.

### **#1 - WORRIES AND TRYING TO CONTROL THE FUTURE**

#### **We Crave Control**

Human beings crave control. It first showed up in a certain garden and had to do with an apple. This craving is a problem because we can’t have both God in control of our life and us in control of our life. Only one person gets to hold the remote...

But it’s very hard for us to let go of that desire for control. Likewise we delude ourselves into thinking we can attain that control.

Our illusion of control is reinforced a thousand ways each day. Most of them small, but they add up. Is the shower too cold? Too hot? The coffee not sweet enough? How many outfits should we try on today? Which radio station or podcast? Do we want to answer that call or not? Think of all the decisions and adjustments you make each day to tailor your environment and activities to suit your desires and preferences.

Almost everything we do these days reinforces the mirage that we have control.

Now, there is nothing new about this. Along with that certain garden incident, every event in the bible somehow relates to the conflict of man seeking to do his will over God’s.

It just so happens that modern life allows us to manipulate our environment to a stunning degree.

Here’s the thing – we don’t simply want to control our environment and our actions – it turns out that our desire for control runs much, much deeper.



## **We Don't Just Want to Control What We Do – We Want to Control Outcomes**

One of the biggest problems with our hunger for control is that we seek to extend our grasp into the mythical land of outcomes. We don't just want to control what we *do*, we want to control *how it turns out*.

We set up remarkably sophisticated systems of behavioral controls and have high expectations for their outcomes. In fact, we constantly analyze patterns to determine how to get the outcome we desire:

*If I study this way, I'll get the grades I need to get into the college of my choice.*

*If I do this exercise program, I'll get the figure I desire.*

Here's a particularly damaging pattern - *if I do things for people they'll be nice to me* - and it's evil twin - *if I'm nice to people they'll do things for me*.

The world around us actually understands this quite well. *Buy this product, wear these clothes, go on this exercise program, go on this vacation, take this course ... and you will get the outcome you desire.*

Now, there's nothing wrong with being mindful of the future. It's all a matter of the proper ordering of our will and God's will. Here's the two-part test for whether we're going down the dark path of control:

1. Are we striving to bring about our version of the future or God's?
2. Is our planning for the future overwhelming our ability to live in the grace of the present moment?

Question #1 reminds us that we must always be seeking to do God's will rather than bend the future to our will. We should always be endeavoring to remain close to God and discern His will for our life (more on this on Day 5).

But what about the times when we do consult with God but remain

uncertain whether we're following His plan or ours? This brings us to Question #2. We need to be observant of what is happening in the present. If the plan we're following is robbing us of receiving God's grace in the present, we're probably veering off target.

Let's look at studying for a test. Is there anything wrong with that? Does it violate Question #1? Not in and of itself. God's plan for our future includes making the most of our intellectual ability. But what about Question #2? What if we become obsessed with getting the top grade, rather than studying for the love of learning and making the most of our God-given gifts? What if that obsession blinds us to other work God might be calling us to in the present moment? If so, we're now becoming addicted to controlling outcomes rather than living virtuously in the moment and trusting in God's plan.

### **We Don't Just Want to Control Outcomes – We Want to Control Our Own Happiness**

Now we come to the last stop on the control rollercoaster ride. We not only want to control what we do. Nor do we only want to control outcomes. What we really want to control is how we feel. In fact, we want to control whether or not we feel happy.

The two big problems with all this are that (1) we never really have control and (2) we are terrible judges of what will make us genuinely happy.

This double dose of reality is the source of our worries. Let's look at each.

### **Control is an Illusion**

We don't really control outcomes.

What's more, outcomes reside in the land of tomorrow.

We certainly don't control tomorrow. We don't control 10 seconds from now.

Should we reasonably prepare for the future? Certainly – that's the virtue of prudence. In the present moment, when appropriate, we should consider and act on thoughts like, "what are the reasonable

things to do for the future.” But it is unreasonable to base our life on the expectation that we can manipulate events to guarantee an exterior environment that will make us happy.

What happens is that we get used to patterns (if I do *this*, *that* will happen) and those patterns give us a false sense of control and we build our life around that false sense of order. Until, inevitably, we come to the exception to the pattern, and then things unravel in a hurry.

We face this again and again, each time we butt up against the unexpected. Oh, how unwelcome is the *unexpected*! Health problems. Money problems. Relationship problems. Even “good” unexpected happenings are often a curse in disguise. How many happy lottery winners have you read about? And then there’s the ultimate lack of control – death.

### **Our Plan for Happiness Is Not So Happy**

Even if we could achieve our plan for control, it wouldn’t deliver the true happiness we desire.

The illusion of control is what prompted Solomon to bemoan “vanity of vanities.” He was looking for control and happiness in all the wrong places. Solomon commanded all that the world could offer – wealth, power, fame, adulation. He was a man in complete control of his exterior circumstances. In the end he found that none of it satisfied. None of it brought happiness. Thus, “all is vanity.” Which is to say, all worldly schemes for happiness will ultimately fail to satisfy us.

Jesus shows us the source of true happiness, defined first and foremost in the two great commandments – love God and love neighbor. And Jesus shows us how to live that out by His example (His complete self-giving) and teaching (particularly in the Sermon on the Mount). Put differently, for the Christian, happiness and holiness are the same.

### **Worries - the SOLUTION: Trust the Future to God's Providence**

The response to worries is simply to let go of the future and trust in God's plan for our future. "Oh, is that all?" In fact it is.

Here are three simple actions to help us "let go, and let God":

1. Meditate on Matthew 6:25-32 ("Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink....") Should we use our God-given intellect to make reasonable plans for the future? Sure. But we should detach ourselves from any expectations of how the future will actually play out. Meditating on the living Word of God is a powerful way to interiorize the Truth that God reveals to us in sacred scripture.

2. Seek examples to remind yourself that your vision and plan for the future is not reliable, but God's vision and plan is! We all have experiences of forcing the outcome we desired and finding it was not so rosy. Vice versa, we have experiences of a dreaded event turning out to be not so bad after all. Relive these experiences and bring them to God in meditation.

3. Practice detachment. Find a few small ways each day to give up a little control. When your phone rings, answer it even if you were not planning on having a conversation at that moment. Or, set the shower a little cooler than normal. Or, order the first thing that presents itself at a restaurant rather than pouring over the menu for the perfect item. Practicing trust and detachment in small doses of daily activity strengthens our trust muscles for the genuine trials of life that inevitably come.

### **#2 - WOUNDS AND BEING CONTROLLED BY THE PAST**

Wounds from past events may be self-inflicted, in which case we suffer regret and self-condemnation. Or, the wounds may simply be from the misfortunes of life, and we experience a deep frustration. Or, the wounds may be inflicted by others, and stir up anger and resentment.

## **Anger and Resentment**

“Anger as a deadly sin is ‘a disorderly outburst of emotion connected with the inordinate desire for revenge.’ . . . It is likely to be accompanied by surliness of heart, by malice aforethought, and above all by the determination to take vengeance.” (Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*)

A passing feeling of anger is not an issue – what matters is what we do with it. Do we let it pass or do we invite it into our interior and nurture it?

That kind of interior invitation leads to sinful anger, or wrath, and is tied to a desire for revenge. That is resentment - rightly or wrongly, we believe we experienced an injustice, and we want to extract retribution. In most situations, we’re not in a position to get what we think is due to us, so we extract what retribution we can through our self-righteous anger.

There are several ways we go about this. There is the passive-aggressive response – we don’t actually show our anger but find discrete ways to act on it – we talk behind someone’s back, or we allow them to suffer some trouble that we could have helped avoid. Or we may resort to the silent treatment. Or we simply stew in our anger with endless dialogues in our head.

## **Regrets and Frustrations**

Regrets are not simply emotions – they are a potent combination of past events, feelings and imagination. Regrets can be a powerful source of anger and other emotional and spiritual negativity. Regrets have a way of resurfacing and robbing us of our peace. The rotten fruits of regret are manifold: guilt, self-loathing, anger at others, anger at God, fear of consequences from past mistakes, and fear of repeating past mistakes, just to name a few. The problem is that, in our pride, we think we ought to be more than we are, and we grow angry with our past-self and the inconvenient reality of the consequences of our mistakes.

We also carry with us frustrations at the injustices of life. The loss

of a job. A challenging medical condition. Political unrest. You name it. These lead to self-pity and an amorphous anger that is directed at society, or “the universe,” or God Himself.

### **Again We Encounter Our Attempts at Control**

In every disordered response to past wounds we encounter our attempt at control. Whether we are trying to extract retribution from others, or failing to own up to past mistakes or unwilling to accept the trials that come with life in a fallen world, anger is often our last resort to claim what little control we can in the face of perceived injustice.

The futility of all this, as is often pointed out, is that wrathful anger actually has the opposite effect - it simply gives control over to whatever is making us angry.

### **Wounds - the SOLUTION: Trust the Past to God’s Mercy**

Starting with self-focused anger in the form of regret of past sins, we first need to seek God’s forgiveness. For Catholics the fullness of God’s mercy is found in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. For non-Catholics a Prayer of Perfect Contrition is a good starting point (copied below). As we’re doing this, trite as it sounds, we also need to forgive ourselves. As previously mentioned, in our pride we think we ought to be more than we are, and we tend to hold grudges against our “past self.”

We start off by seeking God’s forgiveness because we cannot offer to others what we have not received.

We then need to extend forgiveness to everyone we are angry with or hold a grudge against. “Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation” is the operative principle here. You don’t necessarily even need to forgive the person directly. You first need to forgive them, in the name of Jesus, in your heart. St. Paul tells us:

*“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” (Eph. 4:31–32)*

Forgiveness is challenging, so trust in this – forgiveness is a decision not a feeling. If we choose to forgive someone in Christ, they are forgiven. We may not feel it. The sting of their betrayal may extend well into the future, but that does not undue the forgiveness. It's similar to major surgery. If it was successful, that is the end of the story. Recuperation and feelings of the pain of healing may last for some time, but the surgery was successful and over with, nonetheless.

Finally, we need to let go of anger at the “random” hardships of life, like a physical ailment. First, if we're angry at God, we need to repent and confess that anger to Him. Second, we have to learn to accept hardships in this life. Christ himself experienced and patiently accepted all the hardships and inconveniences of life; we shouldn't expect any different experience for ourselves.

All this forgiving and accepting, while simple in concept, can indeed be difficult in practice. Our memories and emotions are powerful, and the enemy of our peace will stir them up to harass and deter us. It takes time to heal and purify our memories and emotions and turn our will ever more to God. We will spend the next three days on that topic.

### **#3 - TRUSTING GOD'S GOODNESS IN OUR PRESENT TRIALS**

#### **Trials are Inevitable**

We've established that we're not actually in control, and even if we were it would do us no good because our definition of the happiness we're trying to control is probably off the mark.

In that context, trials and tribulations can be blessings if we receive them as a control freak cold turkey program – forcing us to relinquish our illusion of control and to trust in God's plan.

What's more, when we learn to accept life's trials and hardships we transform them into opportunities of grace (more on that Day 5).

We must also avoid attempting to dodge suffering by living in a

future fantasyland. We only encounter God in the present. We can only be sanctified and transformed in the present.

But, if all we take from a crisis is anger and frustration at our loss of control, or just as dangerous, adopt a mindset that “I’m going to be even more prepared to be in control next time,” we’ll have lost the grace of the moment to grow closer to God.

This discussion of trials is not meant to be flippant. It is certainly easier to apply this to the more “garden variety” crosses of routine challenges and short-term crises. But there, of course, many great crosses in life, such as the loss or suffering of a loved one or living with chronic pain or clinical depression. It is much easier to practice the principles of this retreat on the smaller crosses of life, in preparation for the inevitably greater trials. If you are in the midst of a major trial, be assured that the principles of this retreat will help you to lean on the Lord, even if our practical examples tend to reflect the more ordinary variety of trials that we encounter on a daily basis.

### **Trials - the SOLUTION: Trust the Present to God’s Love**

Trust is one of those virtues that grows through tribulation (see Romans 5:3-5). Our faith and trust grow when we prevail over adversity by the grace of God. Here are some approaches to take when you are in the midst of trials:

1. **Accept.** We must accept the reality of our pain and suffering without becoming embittered. “We accept good things from God should we not accept evil?” (Job 2:10) God permits evil and will bring good from it. As painful as it can be, we must embrace our present circumstances, no matter how trying, and cling to God, trusting in His plan for our life.

2. **Don’t just accept - pray for acceptance.** It is not easy to accept evil in our lives and trust that God will bring good from pain and suffering. We must pray for that grace.

3. **Look to Jesus.** Jesus Christ sanctified suffering, most perfectly on the Cross. The greatest good (the resurrection) came from the greatest evil (the crucifixion). Christ Himself encourages



us to embrace our crosses, because we draw particularly close to Him when we do so. “By his passion and death on the cross Christ has given a new meaning to suffering: it can henceforth configure us to him and unite us with his redemptive passion.” (CCC 1505)

**4. Offer your pain and suffering.** “Offer it up” has become something of a catch phrase, but it reveals a great truth. Christ told us that some things can only be accomplished through prayer and suffering (or fasting). When we offer our suffering to God it becomes meritorious, a source of grace. Try offering your pain and suffering for loved ones or for the Church and be consoled in knowing that you are, by God’s grace, transforming your pain and suffering into miracles in someone else’s life. It is in this spirit that St. Paul declared, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.” (Col 1:24)

## **HEALTHY OCCASIONS OF AGITATION AND ANXIETY**

In some instances, negative emotions such as frustration or anxiety may be healthy and showing us that an area of our life needs genuine attention. For example, if we might experience anxiety because we’re prone to procrastination and are not attending to our duties in a timely and responsible manner. In that scenario, the anxiety can be seen as a healthy alert that we need to make changes. Spirit-led self-reflection and discernment, which are part of the next three days of this retreat, are the key to sorting out healthy and unhealthy emotional responses and their root cause.

Taking this concept further, God also permits “hard consolation” if we are living in persistent, serious sin. In the words of St. Ignatius, God will allow a “biting and stinging” of our conscience. For example, if someone is having an extramarital affair, they will indeed experience lack of peace in the present and worry for the future. In that case, those are valid responses – they are signs of spiritual life – of a conscience that has not been completely deadened by worldliness.

This is covered much more in 30 Days to Christian Meditation,

but it is important to mention here – if you think this applies to you, it is vitally important that you get the support you need to turn to God, repent, and break the pattern of sin. Receive this retreat as God’s call for you to return to Him and take hold of the freedom, peace and happiness He desires for you.

## **SURRENDERING CONTROL AND LETTING GOD LOVE YOU**

Here’s a final question for today - how do we practice our love for God?

We can’t send him greeting cards or a muffin basket. It’s very true that we can love and serve our neighbor – and that is an exceedingly good way to respond to God’s love for us. But how do we love Him directly?

First and foremost, we love God by letting him love us. “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us first” (1 John 4:10)

Here’s the kicker - we can’t let God love us if we don’t trust Him. And we trust God by letting God be God. We must be small and humble so that he can be large in our life.

So, if you’re going through a trial, now is the time to grow in faith and trust in God. Pray and pray again, “Jesus, I trust in you” and give no quarter to doubts, anger or fear. There have been occasions when I’ve prayed that prayer hundreds of times back-to-back, and never has He failed me.

After all, He’s the one who’s in charge.

## **SPIRITUAL TAKE-AWAYS FOR DAY 2**

We crave control over not only what we do, but the outcomes of our actions and the happiness that we think we’ll derive from those outcomes.

In reality, we have very little control. The patterns we set up in life

(if I do this, the outcome I desire will happen) are inevitably disrupted by unexpected trials and setbacks.

And in reality, even if we had perfect control over our life, like King Solomon thought he had, we would find that our plan for happiness misses the mark.

We have to give up our hunger for control and learn to trust in God's plan for our happiness.

Reflect on examples from your life that remind you that your plan for happiness is often off the mark.

Practice detachment. Find a few small ways each day that you can give up a little control. When your phone rings answer it even if you were not planning on having a conversation at that moment. Or, order the first thing that presents itself at a restaurant rather than pouring over the menu for the perfect item.

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.*

## **DAY 2 POSTSCRIPT: ACT OF PERFECT CONTRITION**

Forgive me my sins, O Lord, forgive my sins of my youth, the sins of my age, the sins of my soul, the sins of my body, my idle sins, my serious voluntary sins, the sins I know, the sins I do not know: the sins I have concealed so long, and which are now hidden from my memory.

I am truly sorry for every sin, mortal and venial, for all the sins of my childhood up to the present hour.

I know my sins have wounded Thy Tender Heart, O my Savior, let me be freed from the bonds of evil through thy most bitter passion, death and resurrection, Jesus my precious Lord, forget and forgive what I have been.

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

## DAY 3: HEALTH CONTROL I - 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 disordered desire for control – especially control of external events and the course of our future. 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; and we looked at specific ways to practice each.

Today we look at the one aspect of our life where we are absolutely called to take control - over ourselves and especially our interior life.

In particular we are called to take control of our thoughts and emotions as best as we are able, because left unchecked they thwart our effort to yield ourselves to God and His plan for our life. Rather than supporting our good intentions, they work against us. That is not to say there aren't other aspects of our fallen nature that separate us from God and His plan for our happiness, but getting our emotions in order (and the thoughts and actions that are spurred by them) is generally the most direct path to healing all of our interior.

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**

Three key aspects of our human nature are our intellect, our will, and our emotions.

God is pure spirit. We, however, are body and spirit – we are spiritual beings enfleshed in a physical body. But 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.

We also possess emotions, which are part of our bodily nature, and are perceptible responses to exterior events and interior thoughts. Our emotions are meant to support our intellect and will – to naturally attract us to good thoughts and actions and repel us from bad.

Because of the fall, our intellect is darkened (we don’t readily understand God’s truths) and our will is weakened (we don’t make good choices, or see them through). And because of the fall, our emotions are disordered in two ways. First, we tend to desire things that are bad for us (if one serving of cake is good, five servings are better). Second, instead of taking a back seat to our higher powers of intellect and will, our emotions override ride them and seize control – we respond emotionally (like an animal) rather than rationally (like a child of God, made in His image).

In short, our disordered emotions are a big problem. But we mustn’t give up on them.

While our emotions exist as part of our bodily nature, which we share with animals, human emotions run much deeper and when functioning well, penetrate 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 – we place much greater emotional value on the newborn).

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 must 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).

But most people struggle mightily 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.

## **PRACTICAL EXAMPLE - 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.*

## DAY 4: HEALTH CONTROL II - UNITING YOUR WORRIES, WOUNDS AND TRIALS WITH CHRIST THROUGH MEDITATION



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.*

**O**UR FOURTH VACCINATION session provides an approach that gets to the heart of how we overcome worry and wounds, and how we respond to actual trials and crises in our life. We're going to probe deeply into why genuine interior harmony and peace is found through Christian meditation.

First, let's recap vaccination days 1 through 3.

In Day 1 we discussed that God is always in charge – in good times and bad. That should be very comforting. God permits trials and tribulations, but no matter what happens God is working through it so that “all things work for good for those who love God.” God desires to give us His peace, to sustain us through all trials (which is why Christ gives the “peace that the world cannot give”). Ideally, this should be the end of it – we should go forth secure in this knowledge and inoculated against all of life's challenges. But it's not that simple.

In Day 2 we came face to face with the problem. Us. What goes wrong is us. First – we want to be in control. It's very hard for us to give up control. What we want to control not only what we do, but the outcome. And we want to control the outcome because we think that will bring us happiness. We fool ourselves into thinking our plan, our desired outcome and our definition of happiness is better than God's. The response to this is to cultivate complete trust in God and in His plan for our life and our happiness – “Trust the past to God's mercy, the present to God's love, and the future to God's providence.” Trust is how we demonstrate our love for God – by letting Him love us.

In Day 3 we looked at reigning in our disordered emotions by taking custody of them. Our emotions are disordered because they attract us to the wrong things (attachments) and they overwhelm our intellect and our will. We tame and reorder our emotions and associated thoughts and imagination by taking custody of them: we remain aware of our emotional responses, we assess them, and we take action - if they are appropriate, we sanction them, if not we disavow them.

A second way we tame and reorder our emotions is by uniting them to Christ in Christian meditation. This method builds on the approach of taking custody of our emotions – along with taking custody we will see how we bring them to Christ for healing, to deepen our self-knowledge, and also as a point at which to grow in our relationship with Him.

## **CHRISTIAN MEDITATION**

Christian meditation is the heart of our relationship with God. Through Christian meditation we come to know God and speak with Him, which includes listening to Him. We come to know God, above all, by meditating on Him as He has revealed Himself through scripture. We spend time in silent prayer reflecting on a specific passage of scripture; inviting the Holy Spirit to illuminate our minds



to better know God. And, in sacred silence, we learn to speak from our heart to God and to listen to Him.

Our relationship with God, cultivated through Christian meditation, is indispensable to every aspect of our being; our personal aspirations, our relationships with others and our activities in the world.

In terms of dealing with worries, wounds and trials, Christian meditation provides a powerful way to know and follow God's will for our life (so that we can accept the trials we face) and redeem our disordered emotions (to heal wounds and dispel worries).

## **THE SILVER LINING OF WORRIES, WOUNDS AND TRIALS**

The silver lining of worries, wounds and trials is that they reveal our vulnerabilities. Through them, God brings into the light the hidden places of our interior life that need attention.

We can appreciate this from other spheres of life. What happens with our house when there is a problem? We go right to that issue. If your roof is leaking you go after the leak. Maybe the entire roof needs replacing, in which case the leak was actually a helpful early warning system. It is the same with health issues. When you have a pain, you go to the doctor for that pain. There is likely a deeper underlying issue, but the immediate pain serves the important role of getting your attention and motivating you to take action so that the process of diagnosis, treatment and healing can begin.

This same dynamic is at work with worries, wounds and trials. God is showing us where He wants to heal us right then and there in our life. This is what Christ always does. Where does He come to people? He comes to them where they're hurting most. He comes to the blind man in his blindness. To the lepers in their leprosy. To the adulterer in the adultery. He addresses their immediate pain and suffering.

And then Christ goes deeper.

“Go and sin no more.” “Go, pick up your cross and follow Me.” “Your faith has saved you.” Where there is faith, Christ’s ministration penetrates to the soul and provides not just healing but salvation. And with salvation comes a bonus – mission.

“Go and sin no more.” “Go, pick up your cross and follow Me.” “Your faith has saved you.” Where there is faith, Christ’s ministration penetrates to the soul and provides not just healing but salvation. And with salvation comes a bonus – mission. We’re sent forth to bring Christ to the world in a new way.

Maybe we’ve learned something about how we can forgive others through Christ. Maybe we’ve learned how to offer up our sufferings. Maybe we’ve grown in letting go of the stress and anxiety of trying to control the future. Any of those is a great blessing – but not just for us – we bring that new found peace, wisdom and self-control into the world.

It all starts with turning to Christ in our woundedness.

When fear or anger well up, or whenever the next crisis befalls you - that is where Christ wants to break into your life to work something new in you.

Let Him.

Here is one way to do just that...

## **UNITING OUR WORRIES, WOUNDS AND TRIALS TO CHRIST**

Uniting our worries, wounds and trials to Christ - so we can prevail through His strength - is deceptively simple. Start here:

1. Make note of what is most troubling to you in the form of wounds, worries or trials.
2. Bring that to Christ in prayer with related scripture.

Let's say that our discernment practice (be aware, assess, take action) shows we have a recurring struggle with envy. If we weren't already familiar with the spiritual aspects of envy we would do a little homework and discover that envy is actually disordered sorrow when something good happens to someone else. There may also be resentment and indignation layered in. We would then seek scripture that relates to envy. For example the parable of workers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1-16), wherein all of the workers were paid the same wage regardless of how long they worked. We might hear Christ tell us how much he loves us and that we shouldn't be comparing ourselves to others. Or we might be led to the passage from His passion where the people choose to release the criminal Barabbas over Jesus. And we might hear Christ empathize with the injustices that we experience in life.

We can also go to Christ to sanction healthy emotions. Continuing the example of envy, the Holy Spirit might lead us to the parable of prodigal son, showing us that we are the older brother, and we should rejoice at the good fortune of others. Or, if we are experiencing extreme grief and sorrow at the loss of a loved one, we could visit with Christ at the tomb of Lazarus and share in Christ's grief and sorrow at the death of his friend.

By connecting with Christ and His emotions, actions and teaching in the Gospels, not only do we invite Him to guide us and heal our emotions, we also grow in relationship with Him by uniting our life experiences with His.

## **CLOSING THOUGHTS**

If you're not certain how to get started with Christian meditation, here's what you do. Find a quiet place and pray this one verse – Isaiah Chapter 53, verse 5. This is a passage describes how Christ heals us through His suffering (I'm not going to reproduce it here, it is far better that you sit with it from your own bible). Take that verse to God. Ask Jesus what that verse means for you. Tell him what is troubling you.

Tell Him what it is that you want to be healed. If you're not certain you can name it yourself, then ask Him. Ask Him what He desires for you. Then spend time in silence. Let Him answer. Will you get distracted? Probably. Will you literally "hear" an answer – maybe not. Trust that whether or not you "hear" something, God is doing His good work in your soul and in time you will come to recognize the fruit. Repeat this for 15 minutes each day.

The Interior Life mobile app has an introduction to Christian meditation as well as the 30 Days to Christian Meditation retreat that teach how to overcome distraction, how to be confident in "hearing God's voice," and answers the many other questions that are likely arise.

## **SPIRITUAL TAKE-AWAYS FOR DAY 4**

Our disordered emotions can also be reharmonized with other interior faculties (especially intellect and will) by uniting them with Christ through meditation.

The silver lining of worries, wounds and trials is that they reveal our vulnerabilities. Through them, God brings into the light the hidden places of our interior life that need attention.

When we become aware of vulnerabilities, we should meditate with a related scripture passage. Through that meditation the Holy Spirit works with us at both our conscious and subconscious levels, to reorder our interior.

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.*

## **DAY 4 POSTSCRIPT**

The following are suggested scripture passages as a starting point for prayer. The list is based on pairs of emotions from classical philosophy and Christian anthropology. Note that any of these emotions (other than despair) can be either healthy or disordered, depending on context. For example, a person could feel a disordered delight when something bad happens to someone else, in which case the antidote is to practice sorrow on their behalf. The point is to enter into scripture to focus our prayer for an increase in healthy emotions and to dispel unhealthy emotions.

### **Love and Hate**

Love – the Gospels are one entire love story. But John has particularly powerful passages, such as this - “As the father has loved me, so I have loved you...” (Jn 15:9-17)

Hate – Jesus hated evil in all its forms. Scripture records His particular loathing for lies and hypocrisy. See, for example, Matthew Chapter 23, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites...”

### **Desire and Aversion**

Desire – here are two examples: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...” (Mt 5:6), and, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you...” (Lk 22:15)

Aversion – in His humanity Jesus experienced aversion in the form of a certain type of frustration and fatigue. For example, “O faithless and perverse generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I endure you?” (Mt 17:17) And, as with “hate”, Jesus had a thorough-going aversion to evil in all its forms, such as, “Get behind me satan,” and “Father, if it be your will, may this cup pass”.

### **Delight and Sorrow**

Delight – true delight is joy in doing our Father’s will: “These

things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full..." (Jn 15:11)

Sorrow – Jesus at Lazarus' tomb: "And Jesus wept." (Jn 11:35) And, "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the cursed in spirit." (Ps 24:18)

### **Courage and Fear**

Courage – most every event of Christ's Passion demonstrates Jesus' supernatural courage (the scourging at the pillar, crowning with thorns, being humiliated in the courts of Herod and Pilate, carrying the cross and on and on).

Fear – we can unite our fears with Jesus, during His agony in the garden, anticipating the trials He was to undertake. "He was in such agony and He prayed so fervently that His sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground." (Luke 22:44) Note that Jesus' agony was akin to our healthy emotion of fear, but it never banished His faith in the Father. In fact, He prayed to the Father even more fervently. Authentic fear stirs up our faith rather than dispels it. It is in response to that sort of faith-killing fear that Jesus' encourages us to "be not afraid!"

### **Hope and Despair**

Hope – Jesus counsels us to have complete dependence on God and trust in His goodness. For example, "Therefore I tell you do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink..." (Mt 6:25) Our greatest hope is found in Jesus' promise of salvation and eternal life, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (Jn 4:13-14)

Despair – Jesus never experienced true spiritual despair, as despair is to doubt in God's omnipotence and goodness. In times of despair you should pray with examples of hope to oppose that despair. That

said, in Jesus' humanity, and out of His tireless effort to reach out to all peoples, Venerable Fulton Sheen teaches that Jesus allowed himself to experience the pain, isolation and helplessness of the atheist when he cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:45-50)

## Anger

Anger is our response to injustice, and Christ demonstrates righteous anger as He cleanses the temple. (Mt 21:12 and Jn 2:13)

Many times, when we are faced with injustice, we are actually called to bear it with heroic patience. In those instances, you can again look to the examples of Christ heroically bearing His Passion (as in the examples for "courage").

And we are called to temper anger with mercy. For example, "blessed are the merciful..." (Mt 5:7)

We can also meditate with the virtues that vanquish the deadly sins:

<b>Pride</b>	<b>Humility</b> "Do not be called 'Master'; you have but one master, the Messiah. The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted." (Mt 23:10-12)
<b>Greed (Avarice)</b>	<b>Generosity and Trust in God</b> "Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go with him for two miles. Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow." (Mt 5:41,42)
<b>Lust</b>	<b>Chastity</b> "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Mt 5:27,28)

# 5-Days to Spiritual Vaccination

<b>Anger</b>	<b>Meekness</b> “But to you who hear I say, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. To the person who strikes you on one cheek, offer the other one as well, and from the person who takes your cloak, do not withhold even your tunic.” (Lk 6:27-29)
<b>Gluttony</b>	<b>Temperance</b> (e.g. discipline, moderation, sobriety) “Be sober and vigilant. Your opponent the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for [someone] to devour.” (1Peter 5:8)
<b>Envy</b>	<b>Kindness</b> “But rather, love your enemies and do good to them, and lend expecting nothing back; then your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” (Lk 6:35)
<b>Sloth</b>	<b>Diligence and Magnanimity</b> “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” (Mt 7:21)



## DAY 5: THE ONE THINGS THAT MATTERS MOST (BECAUSE EVERYTHING ELSE MATTERS TOO)



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.*

**I**N DAYS 3 and 4 we looked at two approaches to respond to future worries, past wounds and present trials – by (1) taking custody of our emotional responses and (2) bringing these experiences to Christ through meditation.

These are not the only ways to prevail over worries, wounds and trials.

Nor should we only be reactionary. Even better is to prepare for life's trials and tribulations.

Building on Day 4, the single most important preparation for trials is ... to sit.

To sit in silence. Sacred Silence.

Christian meditation, as we looked at in Day 4 is not only the foundation of how we tame our unruly emotions, but also how we transform our entire interior life through relationship with Christ.

What necessarily proceeds from this, is that Christian meditation perfects everything else that we do, including everything we have looked at to overcome worries, wounds and trials.

There are many other responses to worries, wounds and trials of tremendous value. For example, availing ourselves of the Sacraments and loving our neighbor by giving selflessly to provide for the physical and spiritual needs others. All other forms of prayer and devotions (scripture study, rosary, consecrations, novenas) should be in our spiritual armory.

But none of those are as vital as Christian meditation. And the reason, paradoxically, is because all of those are extremely vital.

In fact, they're so important that they shouldn't be the first thing you do - first comes Christian meditation.

You may recall an advertising campaign by German industrial manufacturing giant BASF: "We don't make the lotion; we make it smoother. We don't make the dress; we make it brighter..." And then, "we don't make a lot of the products you buy, we make a lot of the products you buy better."

In the same way, Christian meditation elevates and perfects everything else that we do. And thus surpasses everything else that we do.

## **HOW CHRISTIAN MEDITATION PERFECTS EVERYTHING ELSE THAT WE DO**

Christian meditation perfects everything else we do because it is the essential element for how we sanctify ourselves. Christian meditation takes us down the path of turning our entire life, every bit of it, into a loving offering to God.

If some or many of the principles and practices listed below are new to you – be not overwhelmed. Settle on the one or two that stand out to you and start to incorporate them into your life. They are also discussed in greater depth in the 30 Days to Christian Meditation retreat. If you’ve not gone on that retreat you should consider it to help get the most out of this one.

For today, trust that through Christian meditation all the other things we do are turned into “a loving conversation with God” (to jointly paraphrase St. Teresa of Avila and St. Jose Maria Escriva). This is why our first response and defense should be Christian meditation.

With that, let’s look at some of these other powerful approaches to manage and mitigate worries, wounds and trials and how Christian meditation elevates them.

## **SACRAMENTS**

The Sacraments are indispensable for spiritual growth (for the non-Catholics, your denomination certainly recognizes some form of sacraments and “markers” of the faith).

The Catholic Sacraments of the Eucharist (receiving Christ fully into ourselves under the appearance of bread and wine) and Reconciliation (as discussed in Day 3) – are particularly powerful sources of grace. God knows the rhythms of our human nature and that we need to be refreshed and renewed on a regular basis (as a rule, weekly for the Eucharist and at least monthly for Reconciliation).

But the spiritual masters are consistent in teaching that even the grace of the Sacraments will be dormant and sterile if we don’t have a personal relationship with God in Christian meditation, through which we act on God’s grace so that it transforms into glory in our life and in the world around us.

## **COUNT OUR BLESSINGS**

Humility is the Queen of Virtues because it vanquishes the most insidious of vices – pride.

That is the powerful spiritual fruit of counting our blessing - gratitude and humility go hand in hand.

The humble person recognizes that there is nothing they have that is not a gift from God. The very fact that we exist at all, the gift of faith and having the possibility of spending eternity in Heaven, these are gifts beyond price.

And then there are all the other blessings in life. Our relationships. Our health. Whatever material comforts we enjoy. All is gift.

Even our sufferings are transformed into gifts when we unite them to Christ and become partakers in His work of salvation.

We all have many gifts in our life that we don't recognize. God often reveals, in meditation, how much we miss, and how even things we look upon as curses are blessings in disguise.

## **DO SMALL THINGS FOR OTHERS**

We were created for community. It is deep in our human nature. "It's not good for man to be alone." And then there's this: "love your neighbor as yourself." And finally, when Jesus had finished washing the grime from the feet of His apostles, he told them (and all of us) "as I have done for you, you should also do."

There is little in life that better takes our focus off our own hardships than helping someone else.

It is very empowering. At those times when we feel (and probably are) powerless to alter our path around our trials, we do indeed have the power to help the people God has placed in our life.

Who is God calling you to help today? How is He calling you to

help them? In Christian meditation God make us aware of who we are called to serve and how. Even more, He may show you, after the fact, surprising ways you have served people around you, perhaps with something as simple as a smile and a kind word.

## **OFFER IT UP**

Offer your pain and suffering.

“Offer it up” has become something of a catch phrase, but it reveals a great truth. Christ tells us “some things can only be accomplished through prayer and fasting.” The merit of fasting is founded in the willing acceptance of some manner of suffering (even the small “suffering” of skipping dessert). “Offering it up” is also part of our role in the ordinary priesthood, which we are part of by virtue of our baptism. The role of a priest is to offer suffering.

It is the same principle when we courageously accept the sufferings that life brings us, rather than reacting with bitterness and anger. When we offer our suffering to God it becomes meritorious, a source of grace. The world literally becomes a little brighter because we are interconnected as the Body of Christ. The closer you are to Christ in Christian meditation, the more mindful you will be to unite your sufferings to His.

Try offering your pain and suffering for loved ones, or for the Church and be consoled in knowing that you are, by God’s grace, transforming your pain and suffering into miracles in someone else’s life.

## **HEAVENLY PERSPECTIVE**

We are strangers in a strange land. We were not created for this fallen world. That is why every single person yearns for Heaven. Yes, some people lose their faith in God and do not believe in Heaven, but that yearning remains as they search for “utopia” on earth.

The bottom line – we were created to spend eternity with God in Heaven and nothing else on earth will ever fulfill that desire.

We must keep fixed in our vision the end goal – Heaven. When we do that, everything else becomes small in comparison.

Let's say you were going through a difficult trial but were told that at the end of it you would be given a check for one billion dollars. Suddenly the trial would seem like nothing. All you would think is "each day I'm closer to that billion dollars." And, instead of focusing on the pain of the trial, you'd be thinking about what you were going to do when you had that check in hand.

That is how it is with a Heavenly perspective. When we do that our trials are nothing more than the path that leads us to that destination.

Christian meditation is a powerful way to renew that Heavenly vision on a daily basis.

## **ROOT SIN (PREDOMINANT FAULT)**

An important teaching in Catholic spiritual tradition which has been lost in modern times is the understanding that each of us suffers from a root sin, sometimes called a predominant fault. Just as we all have human characteristics that are unique to us, such as our fingerprints and unique mix of gifts and talents, we also must grapple with our own unique tendencies to sin. Each of us has one or two areas where we are most inclined to fall into sin.

Our root sin may be any one of the capital sins. Some spiritual masters simplify the list to three potential root sins (which incorporate several of the capital sins) - pride (pride and sloth), vanity (envy, anger and avarice), and sensuality (lust and gluttony). This is based in part on St. John, "For all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh (sensuality) and the lust of the eyes (vanity) and the pride of life (pride) – is not of the Father but is of the world." (1 John 2:16)

Often our root sin is a perversion of a particular strength. Someone who is naturally empathetic and gifted at hospitality and providing comfort to others may fall into sensuality. A person who is particularly capable at accomplishing great things in the world, instead of doing them for God can be turned to do them for their own glory (vanity or vainglory).

The methods in this retreat of growing in self-knowledge and taking custody of our thoughts and actions, all through Christian meditation, are very effective at identifying and overcoming our root sin.

## **ASCETICISM**

Ascetism comes from the Greek word for “exercise” or “effort.” Asceticism is how we willingly perfect ourselves. An athlete training for a competition is practicing asceticism. A student studying for an exam is practicing ascetism.

When we deny ourselves by refusing ourselves some source of pleasure, we are practicing asceticism. This is because our fallen nature naturally craves indulgences and comfort – and left unchecked we crave them more than we crave God. By denying ourselves these cravings (even something as simple as cream in our coffee) we are strengthening our spirit and disciplining our fallen nature (“the flesh”).

We are all undergoing forced suffering in one form or another when we struggle with worries, wounds and trials – and we should strive to “offer it up,” as discussed above.

In addition to that, we can take on a small act of self-denial of our choosing (just as we do each Lent). Any small act will do. And it should be small – so that it is achievable. We want to set ourselves up for success and not attempt a sacrifice so grand that we’re bound to fail (which is very damaging to our spirit).

Small acts of sacrifice done with great love are heroic (blending the teachings of St. Terese of Lisieux with St. Josemaria Escriva).

If you've done this before, you know it's power. If new to you, you will be amazed. Similar to the spiritual empowerment that comes from "offering it up" and from helping others – when we take it upon ourselves to willingly deny ourselves (rather than having it forced upon us by exterior circumstances) and offer that self-denial to God – it increases our self-command and engenders optimism and courage. And, it releases grace into the world.

What sacrifice should you take up? Where will you find the motivation and strength to sustain that spirit of willing self-sacrifice? You know the answer.

## **STOP FEEDING THE BEAST**

Our worries, wounds and trials are exacerbated by our aggressively immoral culture. Almost all secular social media, news media and entertainment are toxic to our spiritual health. One of the best things you can do is get rid of all of it.

This again is covered in depth in the 30 Days to Christian Meditation retreat.

For the purposes of this retreat, any small steps you take to start removing secular influences from your life will pay great dividends in overcoming worries, wounds and trials.

It is also impossible to overstate the powerful grip of secular culture. It is absolutely imperative to stay close to the Lord through daily meditation so that you have the spiritual strength to recognize error when you encounter it and separate yourself from secular poison.



## **MORNING OFFERING AND EVENING EXAMEN**

Our first waking thoughts should be offered directly to God (not our cell phone...). This is our first opportunity to let go of our thirst for control and turn it over to God. With this comes an opportunity to enter into His peace throughout the day. Notice the subtle (or not so subtle) shift this brings in perspective. Let's say you have a challenging meeting later in the day - with a coworker, or a sensitive conversation with a friend, or a doctor's visit about a serious condition. You set yourself up for failure if you go into that meeting with a mindset of how you want to control the situation (e.g. "how am I going to handle this," or "here's what I want to get out of this") – now it's all on you. You set yourself up for success if you first turn it over to God at the start of the day (e.g. "Lord, you will be with me at the meeting; I trust You will stand by me and whatever comes of the meeting you will turn it to the greatest good for me"). Now you've given control to God. All that is left for you to do is show up to the meeting, prepare and participate in it as best as you can, and the rest you turn over to God.

And before turning in at the end of the day we should review our day with God. The Examen prayer from St. Ignatius of Loyola, involves reviewing our day in the company of God, so that the Holy Spirit can show us the spiritual movements of the day. When did we lose sight of God and march down the path of self? When was God trying to get our attention? When were we in danger of succumbing to desolation? When were we a blessing to others?

Examples of morning offerings and a brief summary of the Examen are included in the postscript.

## **MORNING OFFERING AND EVENING EXAMEN**

Building on the practice of being present with God throughout each day, we should begin and end each day with Him.

Our first waking thoughts should be offered directly to God (not our cell phone...).

Before turning in at the end of the day we should review our day with God. The Examen prayer from St. Ignatius of Loyola, involves reviewing our day in the company of God, so that the Holy Spirit can show us the spiritual movements of the day. When was God trying to get our attention? When were we in danger of succumbing to desolation? When were we a blessing to others?

Example morning offerings and a brief summary of the Examen are included in the postscript.

## **PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD**

Offering our day to God is the perfect way to greet the morning. What we need to do next is carry that disposition of mind and heart throughout the day. Often what happens is that we start the day with that beautiful Godly vision and soon after the demands and distractions of the day rush in and before we know it the day is done and we've not again turned our mind and heart to our Lord.

Brother Lawrence, a simple and holy man in the 17th century, lived and shared the Practice of the Presence of God and captured the essence of it in a few brief letters and notes. To practice the Presence of God is to cultivate a loving awareness that God is with us every moment of the day. As we mature in this practice, we arrive at a very dynamic place in which we are attuned to God in the present moment – both receiving from and responding to Him. This awareness of the presence with God in no way distracts us or diminishes our availability to the people and tasks at hand, in fact it heightens and perfects all that we do.

Our time of meditation is our most intimate time with God. But when we set about the rest of our daily activities, we find that they can quickly distract our mind from the reality that we are still in His presence. Practicing the presence of God is a simple way to train our mind to the marvelous reality of His ever-presence – it is how we carry the fruits of our meditation into everything else we encounter

that day. The more we do this, the more we are strengthened against fatigue and temptation, and enlivened to do the good work God has planned for our day.

## **DAILY ROSARY**

In the Rosary we meditate on the great mysteries of the life of Christ. The Rosary is both vocal prayer and meditative prayer. We recite one Our Father and ten Hail Mary's as we meditate on a specific mystery from the Gospel. The recitation of repeated prayers (ten Hail Mary's) is a natural way to focus our mind and avoid distraction. In the East this might be considered a mantra, but in Christian spirituality it serves not to empty ourselves, but rather to create a closeness to Christ and our Blessed Mother.

The Rosary has been a source of spiritual growth for countless saints and people of good will. Our Blessed Mother always guides souls to her Son.

## **DELIVERANCE AND RENUNCIATION**

The enemy of humanity, the devil and his minions, is quite real and constantly working against us. Our faith gives us many ways to dispel bad spirits and one of the simplest and most effective is to call on the Holy Name of Jesus (at the sound of which "every knee must bend").

There is much to be said about demonic activity, but a simple starting point is if you find yourself repeatedly faced with the same setback – such as giving in to the same old temptation, or trapped in a pattern of negative thought – a prayer of renunciation can be a powerful spiritual weapon to drive off demonic influences that are fanning the flames. An example of such prayer is provided in today's postscript.

## **PLAN OF LIFE**

Having a Plan of Life helps us to stay focused on what matters from moment to moment – this focus helps us to not be deterred by worries and wounds, and to find meaning in trials. A Plan of Life clarifies our purpose and motivation at the highest level (getting to Heaven) and drilling down to small details (should I say yes or no to a request for volunteers at my child's school?).

The overarching theme of your plan of life is this: what is your vocation - what are you called to sacrifice for? Christ tells us that the purpose of our life is to lay it down for God and neighbor. It is that sacrificial aspect of your life that powerfully connects you with Christ and gives your life meaning, purpose and fulfillment. It is what makes you most alive. Your Plan of Life will help you take command of how you spend your time so you can give the best of yourself to God and the people He places in your life.

As an example, if you are a wife and mother of young children your plan of life will guide you in how to best give your time and gifts to God (receiving the sacraments, daily meditation, ministry work), family (ordering your home life around liturgical seasons, caring for your marriage and children), neighbor (building meaningful relationships with extended family and friends) and yourself (caring for your health and personal development).

Christian meditation relates to your Plan of Life in two ways – your plan should flow from your time in meditation, and once your plan is developed, you can apply it to discern major decisions in the setting of mediation. Once again, 30 Days to Christian Meditation provides a detailed approach to developing your Plan of Life (see Day 21).

## **DISCERNMENT OF THE WILL OF GOD**

Discernment is a far-ranging activity in the spiritual life. The discernment of spirits is the act of discerning which spirit (good or bad) is influencing you at any given moment. This is not as obvious as it seems; St. Paul warns us that satan “masquerades as an angel of light.” (2Cor 11:14)

And then there is discernment on a grand scale – discerning the will of God for our life. Life’s big decisions can be a source of anxiety (what if I don’t make the right decision?), regret (I fear I made the wrong decision?) and doubt (God, is this really part of your plan?).

Catholicism provides rich teaching and tradition on discernment – all of it relying on the practice of Christian meditation.

## **CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY**

“It is not good for man to be alone.” As said before, we are created for community. But not all communities are equal.

“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

There are two key points in this message. First, “For where two or three are gathered...” This does not mean that God isn’t with us when we’re alone (in fact He directs us to go “into our room” to pray in silence with Him). God is instructing us that we need community – in fact, it is so important for our spiritual health He promises to always join us when we’re in community.

But not just any community, and this brings us to the next point – it’s only in those communities “gathered together in my name.” As we go out into the world all the forces of secularism and division work against us and chip away at our faith and resolve to trust in God. It’s very important that we come together with like-minded Christians, gathered in His name, to be built-up.

## **SPIRITUAL COMBAT**

Finally, draw your strength from the Lord and from his mighty power. Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil. For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens. (Eph 6:10-12)

There you have it. The true battle in this life is not against anyone or anything on earth, it's against the devil and principalities and powers. Principalities and powers refer to choirs of fallen angels – they are ranks of demons. And our battle is also against the other two of our three enemies - the “spirit of the world” and our fallen self.

Of the three enemies, our greatest battle is for our own heart. We cannot redeem satan – he is irrevocably damned to hell. Nor can we redeem the world; at best we can try to bring light to the world where God leads us. But we can master ourselves. And the more we master ourselves, the more we take away the enemy's ability to tempt and derail us. When we perfectly master ourselves, the enemy literally has no place to gain the slightest foothold against us.

Everything we do – including everything in this retreat – is bound up in spiritual combat. In all things we are either moving closer to God, or away.

## **OTHER BENEFICIAL METHODS**

The ways that we live out a holy life and sanctify ourselves and the world around us are endless. All aspects of our vocation, relationships, hobbies, devotions, you-name-it, all are available to God and should be brought into loving relationship with Him. The more we do this, the more we will naturally diminish disordered effects of worries, wounds, and trials.

Specific to worries, wounds and trials, there are many other

approaches that can allied to this vaccination, including everything from conventional wisdom like positive “self-talk” to emerging psychiatric methods like Cognitive Therapy.

Through Christian meditation God will lead you to the ways that He desires for you to be liberated from the bondage of worries and wounds, and how to thrive amidst trials.

## **CLOSING THOUGHTS**

We will close with a point that we touched on yesterday. The real reason Christian meditation works is because of Christ. Everything comes down to one thing, one person - Christ. I can't give you peace in a blog, a podcast, or a video. I couldn't give you peace even if I could write you a check for a billion dollars. No human being on earth can give you everlasting peace, meaning, fortitude, hope or joy. Only Christ can, and He dearly wants to. So dearly He gave His life for you. That is the true power of Christian meditation – drawing you closer to Christ so he can speak to you the words of life that only He can. Are those words that you can “hear?” Most times probably not. But if you commit to daily meditation there is absolutely no doubt that, in time, God will make known His presence and how He is speaking to you and doing His good work in your soul.

This brings us to the close of our Spiritual Super Vaccination Retreat. But this is just the beginning for you and this new aspect of your relationship with God. Continue to deepen the spiritual practices in this retreat and be assured that there are very specific graces God will bring to bear in your life to liberate you from worries, wounds and trials so that you can be fully alive with Him in the present moment.

## **DAY 5 POSTSCRIPT: MORNING OFFERINGS AND EXAMEN**

### **SIMPLE MORNING OFFERING**

Dear Jesus, I offer you all that I am this day. I pray that you possess me and guide my thoughts, words, actions and feelings so that I serve you in all that I do. Please show me your will for me and I beg your forgiveness for anything I do this day that is not as loving as it should be. Amen.

### **TRADITIONAL CATHOLIC MORNING OFFERING**

O Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I offer you my prayers, works, joys, and sufferings of this day for all the intentions of your Sacred Heart, in union with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass throughout the world, for the salvation of souls, the reparation of sins, the reunion of all Christians, and in particular for the intentions of the Holy Father this month. Amen.

### **OUTLINE OF THE EXAMEN (FROM FR. TIMOTHY GALLAGHER, “THE EXAMEN PRAYER”)**

Transition: I become aware of the love with which God looks upon me as I begin this examen.

Step One: Gratitude. I note the gifts that God’s love has given me this day, and I give thanks to God for them.

Step Two: Petition. I ask God for an insight and a strength that will make this examen a work of grace, fruitful beyond my human capacity alone.

Step Three: Review. With my God, I review the day. I look for the stirrings in my heart and the thoughts that God has given me this day. I look also for those that have not been of God. I review my choices in response to both, and throughout the day in general.



Step Four: Forgiveness. I ask for the healing touch of the forgiving God who, with love and respect for me, removes my heart's burdens.

Step Five: Renewal. I look to the following day and, with God, plan concretely how to live it in accord with God's loving desire for my life.

Transition: Aware of God's presence with me, I prayerfully conclude the examen.

### **PRAYER OF BINDING (FROM FR. CHAD RIPPERGER)**

(insert the name of the obstacle you face, e.g. "Spirit of anger")

Spirit of N., I bind you in the Name of Jesus, by the power of the most Precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ and by the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Michael the Archangel, the blessed Apostles, Peter and Paul and all of the saints, and I command you to leave N. (Name of person or object) and go to the foot of the Holy Cross to receive your sentence, in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

## **DAILY SUMMARIES**

For convenience, here's a final summary of key points from each day of the retreat.

### Day 5

Christian meditation is not only how we tame unruly emotions, but also how we transform our entire interior life through relationship with Christ. Because of this, Christian meditation elevates and perfects all the other good practices we may undertake to sanctify our life and inoculate ourselves against fear, anger and doubt.

Among the many other practices are counting our blessings; serving others; offering up our sufferings; maintaining a heavenly perspective; practicing asceticism; detaching from secular media; practicing the presence of God; making a morning offering and evening Examen; praying a daily Rosary; following a Plan of Life; and, practicing discernment.

All of these endeavors, and many others besides, will strengthen us against worries, wounds and trials – but only to the extent that we mold our life to Christ through meditation.

### Day 4

Our disordered emotions can also be reharmonized with our other interior faculties (especially intellect and will) by uniting them with Christ through meditation.

The silver lining of worries, wounds and trials is that they reveal our vulnerabilities. Through them, God brings into the light the hidden places of our interior life that need attention.

When we become aware of vulnerabilities, we should meditate with a related scripture passage. Through that meditation the Holy Spirit works with us at both our conscious and subconscious levels, to reorder our interior.

### 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 – this is a healthy application of our free will and self control.

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

### Day 2

Looking to the future, we crave control over not only what we do, but the outcomes of our actions and the happiness that we think we'll derive from those outcomes.

Seek examples that remind you that nothing good comes when we try to control our life and plan for our vision of happiness, without relying on God. And practice detachment in small ways.

In our past we seek ways to control the pain of wounds; both self-inflicted and caused by others. Forgiveness is our key response – seeking God's forgiveness for our self-inflicted wounds and then offering forgiveness (in Christ) to those who have wounded us.

And we seek to control present trials, to avoid them or suppress them. Acceptance and relying on God's strength is our best response. Our response to the present moment is our one healthy exercise of control (self-control).

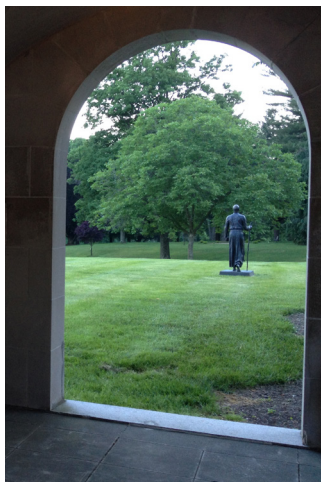
### Day 1

God alone has the perfect plan for your happiness. As part of His

plan He permits us to experience hardships, but He will always draw good from it if you trust in Him.

Fear, anger and doubt are great enemies of faith. Fear of the future, anger and regret from the past, and doubt in present trials paralyze us, so that we are not receptive to God's work in our life.

Search out those examples from your life, or from scripture, or from the lives of Saints or other inspirational figures, that remind you of God's goodness and that He will deliver you from any trial you face.



## RETREAT CLOSING

**T**HIS BRINGS US to the close of our Spiritual Vaccination Retreat. But this is just the beginning for you and this new aspect of your relationship with God.

Hold tight to the specific graces you received while on this retreat. These are the personal insights and inspirations that came to you; these are very specific gifts the Holy Spirit desires just for you at this time and place in your life.

Be aware that over time the enemy of our human nature will work to rob you of those gifts by making them seem distant and no longer potent – as if they were some mirage that never really had the power to change the reality of your life.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Simply focus on the one or two aspects of this retreat that stood out to you and find practical ways to deepen and interiorize those graces. As with all things, allow Christ and His Spirit to lead you in this through Christian meditation.

Be encouraged that this is the work of a lifetime. Encouraged because it means you will always keep growing in self-knowledge, in self-control, in freedom, in peace – because you will keep growing in relationship with God. In some areas of life you may experience very rapid transformation, in other areas the progress may not be so obvious – but only because we can't always see the good work God is doing deep in our interior.

*For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel:*

*By waiting and by calm you shall be saved, in quiet and in trust shall be your strength.*

*Truly, the LORD is waiting to be gracious to you, truly, he shall rise to show you mercy;*

*For the LORD is a God of justice: happy are all who wait for him (Is 30:15,18)*

Keep in mind the key to this vaccination - “Trust the past to God’s mercy, the present to God’s love, and the future to God’s providence.” Stay the course with the tried-and-true spiritual principles in this retreat and turn the rest over to God.

As you continue down this path with Christ be assured of His power to liberate you from worries, wounds and trials so that you can be fully alive with Him in the present moment.

Let’s close in prayer-

*Heavenly Father, thank you for your love for me and your plan for my life. Please help me to grow in the graces You desire for me from this retreat and to grow ever closer to Your Son, through the Holy Spirit. Amen*

## SUGGESTED REFERENCES

### **Christian Meditation and Spirituality**

Smith, Steven – *30 Days to Christian Meditation* Introduction to the Christian theology (who God is), anthropology (who we are) mystical tradition (how we commune with God) and the foundation for other Interior Life retreats and meditations.

Philippe, Jacques – *Time for God* A deceptively simple book on basic principles of speaking with God through Christian meditation.

Lehodey, Dom Vitalis – *The Ways of Mental Prayer* A more advanced and detailed survey of the tradition of mental prayer.

Rohrback, Peter – *Conversation with Christ* An introduction to the Carmelite approach to mental prayer as taught by St. Teresa of Avila.

Scupoli, Lorenzo – *Spiritual Combat* Timeless classic on the practices of combatting the enemy of our human nature.

St. Francis de Sales – *Introduction to the Devout Life* A spiritual classic – St. Francis de Sales touches on most all of the practical aspects of spirituality are covered in short essays written in a conversational tone.

St. Alphonsus Ligouri – *The 12 Steps to Holiness and Salvation* Essays on 12 key virtues necessary for growth in holiness.

### **Ignatian Spirituality**

Gallagher, Timothy – *The Examen Prayer* Very readable but comprehensive introduction to the Examen Prayer – an essential element of spiritual growth.

Gallagher, Timothy – *The Discernment of Spirits* An introduction to

Ignatius' brilliant and insightful 14 Rules of discernment of spirits (i.e. how to assess and respond to the various spiritual movements and inspiration that affect us each day) .

### **Theology and Christology**

Sheed, Frank – *Map of Life* A simple but profound introduction to theology, and how it applies to everyday life – a must read.

Sheed, Frank – *Theology for Beginners* An expansion of the material covered in “Map of Life.”



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

STEVE SMITH IS the founder of *Interior Life*. Steve was born and raised Catholic but, like so many, didn't come to realize the richness and Truth of the faith until later in life. This 5-Day retreat as well as the *Interior Life* apostolate and the *30 Days to Christian Meditation* retreat were borne of Steve's experiences of applying the principles of Christian spirituality (particularly mystical and ascetical theology) to his ordinary life in the world as a husband and father. Through this he learned that living a contemplative life does not have to be at odds with living in the world; in fact the contemplative life elevates and perfects all the other facets of life. Put differently – we're all called to be mystics.

The *Interior Life* apostolate seeks to bring souls closer to Christ through the marvels of Christian spirituality, and hopefully this retreat will do just that for you.