

## DAY 21: REMOTE PREPARATION FOR PRAYER

Yesterday we looked at common sources of distraction in our prayer. Today we will look at one of the deepest roots of the obstacles to our spiritual life – our environment. Our environment matters. Spend time in the company of people who are prayerful and positive, it will rub off on you. Spend time in the company of people who cuss and gossip, that stuff rubs off too. Yes indeed, our environment matters.

Let's open with prayer:

*Come Holy Spirit, make of me a fitting dwelling place for the Lord.*

### **YOUR JUNGLE MISSION**

You've had so much revelation in the past few weeks. About the Savior and His Father and Spirit. About the world around you and the Way to the Mountain Top. About your past life. About who you are and what you are created for.

But it's one thing to *know* all of these things, it's another to *act* on them.

There are still many of your old ways and patterns that you

find yourself attached too, even though you know they're not good for you.

There are new habits and patterns that you want to establish in your life.

It's a lot to hold and sort out and prioritize in your mind at once.

And then you heard one of the other nomads talking about her *plan of life*. Even without knowing the particulars, you knew in an instant that was what you needed, and that was what you'd be discussing with the Savior in the evening.

## **REMOTE PREPARATION FOR PRAYER**

Our time in mental prayer is a distinct activity but it is not meant to be isolated from all the other aspects of our life. And in fact, it can't be. St. Teresa of Avila reminds us again and again that growth in mental prayer goes hand-in-hand with growth in virtue. Mother Teresa was (and the order she founded remains) a living example of this. Christ exemplified this perfectly in His life – His prayer in solitude and His public ministry of healing and redemption were bound together as one complete act of self-giving love.

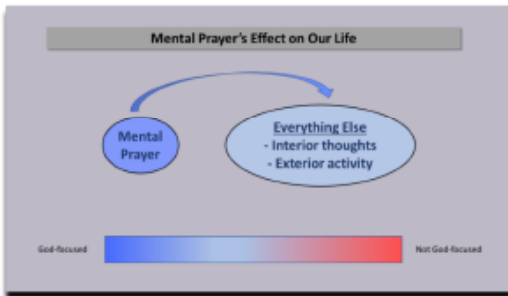
Just so, all the rest of our life effects our mental prayer. And our mental prayer effects all the rest of our life. They are bound together.

In this session we are going to look more closely at the “all of the rest of our life” part of things.

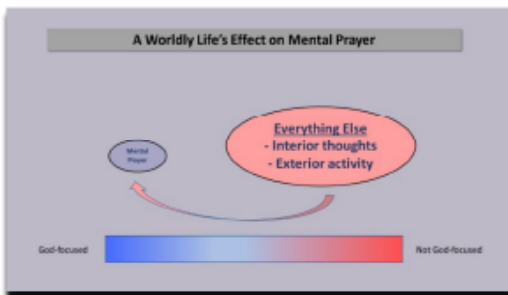
First, let's consider this in the context of our jungle mission. With an undertaking as dangerous and demanding as a journey through a jungle, everything we do will either build us up for success or weaken and hinder us from achieving our goal (the far-off summit). Before setting off on our mission we should train, study and prepare. Once

on our mission, everything we do each day counts. One of the most important things for our mission is to avoid mortal dangers. We need to beware of poisonous creatures particularly in the high grass and thick jungle. We should give a wide berth to the mating and feeding grounds of deadly predators. Along with avoiding sources of certain death, we need to pay careful attention to everything else that we do in the jungle. It matters whether we get enough rest and eat properly. It matters whether we plan for each new day and stay focused during that day's hike. It matters whether we keep our gear in good working condition. Every little thing is either advancing or hindering our success.

The graphics below depict this dynamic in our spiritual life (color versions are available in the ebook and mobile app for this retreat). So, we repeat, all the rest of our life effects our mental prayer. And our mental prayer effects all the rest of our life. They are bound together.



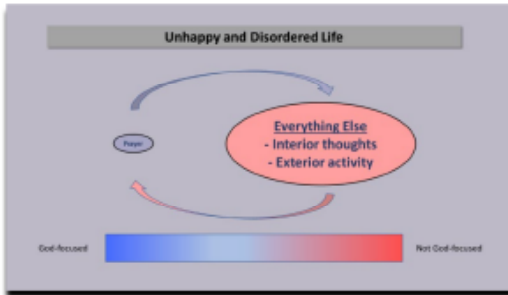
Recall our discussion of our interior and exterior life. Here we're going to simplify it a little. We're going to look specifically at mental prayer (meditation and contemplation) and all the other aspects of our life (our interior thoughts and exterior action). Ideally our mental prayer elevates all of the other aspects of our life.



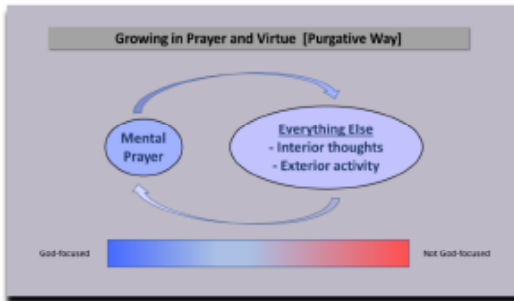
However, the rest of our life also impacts our mental prayer. Everything we do in life effects our relationship with God, and so it directly effects our prayer life.

## 30-Days to Christian Meditation

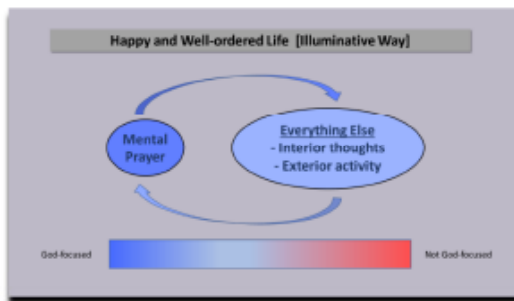
With that summary of the symbiotic relationship of our mental prayer and the rest of our interior and exterior life, let's look at a hypothetical evolution of the spiritual life.



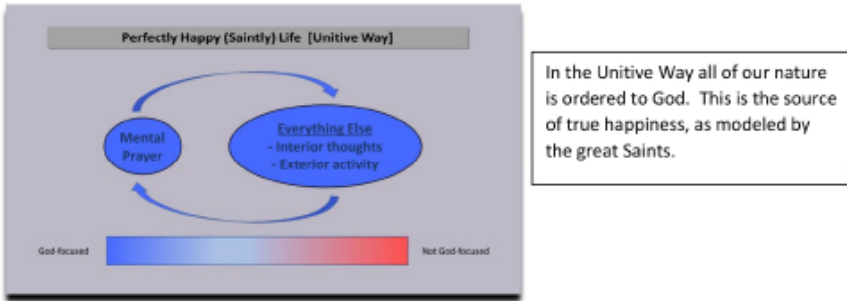
Looking at this two-way relationship between our mental prayer and the rest of our life, if we live a very worldly life, what little prayer we have will be anemic and unable to elevate the other aspects of our life - this is reflected in the Parable of the Sower, "As for what was sown among thorns, this is he who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful."



When we begin to detach ourselves from the world, prioritize our prayer life and bring God more and more into all areas of our life we are coming into the Purgative Way and growing in holiness (and happiness). Now the other areas of life are ceasing to be an impediment to prayer and actually support our prayer life.



As we transition to the Illuminative Way all aspects of our life are becoming harmonized. We have rid ourselves of serious sin and our lower nature is coming under command of our spiritual powers as we grow in virtue and love for God.



## PLAN OF LIFE

It is tremendously useful in any human endeavor to have a plan. Yes, life happens, and best laid plans change and change again. But the effort of planning and having a plan to work from is universally valued. As attributed to President Eisenhower, “Plans are worthless, but planning is everything.”

A Plan of Life will help you focus by starting at the highest level (getting to Heaven) and drilling down to the small details (should I say yes or no to another request for volunteers at my child’s school?).

The following outline offers one approach (based on a hierarchy of relationships); you can come up with many other ways to do this. Some items below might be new to you (e.g. rosary, spiritual direction). next week we will be discussing many of these additional aspects of our spiritual life.

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.

1. **God.** Our first priority is our relationship with God (the first and greatest commandment) and working out our salvation.
  - a. Prayer Life – This includes the totality of prayer, particularly our Sunday Mass obligation (liturgical prayer), daily mental prayer and any specific devotions (e.g. daily rosary, daily examen and intercessory prayer).
  - b. Sacramental Life – When received worthily the Sacraments confer a share in the divine life of the Trinity. You should be receiving the Eucharist weekly and reconciliation once a month. For non-Catholic Christians, your Church probably recognizes some type of “spiritual markers” (such as Baptism, Marriage and Communion) that are similar to the Sacraments. There is more on the role of Sacraments in our spiritual life in Day 28.
  - c. Spiritual Formation – The more we know God and our Faith the better we will love God and others.
    - i. Faith Formation – This includes a solid knowledge of scripture and the tradition of the Church.
    - ii. Spiritual Formation – Commitment to mental prayer and regularly going on retreat. A wise and experienced spiritual guide is indispensable. If you don’t have a spiritual director, pray for one.
    - iii. Growing in Virtue – Our efforts of prayer and faith formation should be borne out in a life of great virtue, living out faith, hope, love, prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance.
    - iv. Devotion to Mary – Mary leads us to her Son. One of the principal ways that God works is through others. How many times has God worked in your life through the people around you? God’s greatest work through a human being was through Mary, and he continues to work through her.

2. **Vocation.** After God, our highest duty is to others through our vocation.
  - a. Marriage – Most of us are called to married life. Our single greatest priority is getting our spouse and our children to heaven. *Everything else* is at the service of this duty to our family.
  - b. Religious – Consecrated life is a unique and beautiful calling; if this is your calling may God richly bless you for giving your life to Him in such a powerful way.
  - c. Single life – This is different from people who are called to married or religious life but have yet to take the vows appropriate to each calling. These are individuals who have discerned they are consecrated to single life, which brings its own beautiful and unique gifts to the world and related commitments and responsibilities.
3. **Body of Christ.** After our personal relationship with God and our duties to our vocation, come our duty to the body of Christ and to all peoples of the world. This is the call to give generously of our time, talent and treasure (which includes tithing – giving at least 10% of our gross household income).
  - a. Providing for the needs of the Church – Actively participating in our local Church and providing for its needs.
  - b. Providing of the less fortunate – Giving generously of our time, talent and treasure to provide for the material and spiritual needs of others.
  - c. Spreading the Gospel – We must strive to share Jesus Christ with the world in all that we do.
4. **Work.** We are all called to work be it gainful employment or managing the home. Because it takes up so much of our time and is important for our worldly existence, work can often overwhelm the other facets of our life. That is the exact

opposite of how it should be, and it is why work comes toward the end of your plan of life. Our work should be much more than simply a source of income or professional achievement or personal satisfaction. Our work is another mission field in which we should sanctify ourselves and spread the Gospel. St. Jose Maria Escriva, the Saint of Saints when it comes to the role of work, spent his life teaching about the importance of work for our spiritual life and salvation. He also taught “For all that, you should put your professional interests in their place: they are only means to an end; they can never be regarded — in any way — as if they were the basic thing.” The “basic thing,” of course, is love of God and neighbor. Thus, this great Saint also says, “Before God, no occupation is in itself great or small. Everything gains the value of the Love with which it is done.” When we approach our work with this mindset it becomes a truly noble undertaking.

5. **Self.** Of course it is important that we love and take good care of ourselves. This includes recreation, hobbies and personal development. Life is richest when this aspect of your life becomes a natural extension of your other relationships and endeavors.

## **SPIRITUAL HISTORY**

As part of developing your Plan of Life, and also to uncover potential sources of distraction, it is useful to take stock of your spiritual history to better understand how it influences your interior life now. What was the religious and spiritual environment of your youth? What were key moments that either moved you closer to God or further from Him? Do you recognize particular spiritual strengths or weaknesses in yourself? Are there any patterns in your life that have led you to this point in your spiritual journey? These days it is also important to consider whether you were ever exposed to the occult (palm or tarot readings, Ouija, etc). These are also all good things to



discuss with a spiritual director (see Day 27), particularly any experiences with the occult.

## **WHAT TO GET RID OF**

Yesterday's session focused on distractions. Most distractions are caused by noise, clutter, and bad information in our brains. Our minds are wonderfully sticky (until you need to remember where you left the car keys). Most everything we take in gets stored somewhere. Now think hard about all the stuff that flows into your brain each day. Advertisements. Mindless television. Idle chit-chat and gossip. Think especially about that two-headed purveyor of intellectual empty calories – the internet and social media. And, as we all know, there is much worse out there than just empty calories.

In addition to the information that we take in there are the activities of family life, work, recreation and so on.

You should start by comparing what you do and what you take in against your Plan of Life.

You will find it is easy to weed out the purely superfluous “stuff” – especially that which is delivered by pixels.

But quite a bit of it will get trickier. We create all manner of reasons why we need to spend time on “informative” websites (we have to “stay current”, it's important to be an “informed member of society”, we want to know what's going on in the world to be able to interact with others, and so on). We create all manner of reasons why it is important to log onto Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media (“it's how we stay connected and build relationships...”).

Here we must take a long and sober look at all of this. Let's take “informative” websites – mainstream news, lots of different self-help sites, podcasts and on and on. How critical are these to our daily functions and responsibilities? Let's look at news as just one example. What are our specific responsibilities as related to news and current

events? For example, we have the responsibility to vote. How much news do you have to consume to know who to vote for in November? Next to none. Beyond that, what is the necessity of “news?” How does it impact your daily life? How does it further your relationship with God? How does it advance your vocation? How does it further your relationship with your family and others? Does it help you have meaningful conversations with people? If some of it does, then fine. But balance that against the time it takes from your other responsibilities. Does it also serve to agitate you and make you angry towards people that don’t think like you? What impact does it have on your prayer life? Is it even accurate and intellectually beneficial?

Social media deserves a particularly careful review. It is very easy to try to justify social media with a few “healthy” anecdotal uses. But think long and hard on this one. Is social media promoting healthy, meaningful relationships? Do you really need to be tracking trivial details of a long-lost middle school friend? To everything in life there is a season. Many relationships are meant to run their course and come to a natural end. As for people you really do need to stay connected with, could the incidental contact made on Facebook be better replaced with a meaningful phone call? To the extent that you do have meaningful activities on social media are you able to login for just a few minutes without being drawn click-by-click into the soul-sucking vortex of posts, images and video clips? Social media is designed to be addictive – search “social media dopamine” for starters. Treat it with the same caution you would treat any other addictive substance. Quite simply, your life would be better without Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and whatever else is bound to come floating down the never-ending social media river of drivel and sewage.

It should also go without saying, but in our current culture it bears repeating – everything remotely immoral must be discarded. Most magazines in the supermarket checkout lane are pornographic and wildly immoral in countless other ways. Many popular novels are out-right filth (think *Fifty Shades of Grey*) or at least not worthy of your precious time (life is too short to read second rate books).

Almost nothing from Hollywood and on mainstream network and cable TV belongs in your brain nor anyone else's. Imagine Christ or our Blessed Mother is watching TV with you. It makes you shudder – right? Almost all pop music must go. Have you ever actually listened to the lyrics – whether you know it or not your subconscious is taking it all in.

Similarly, you can review where the rest of your time goes. Recreation, sports, other social activities – are they in settings and with people that are lifting you up or bringing you to near-occasions of sin?

### **WHAT TO KEEP AND WHAT TO BRING ON BOARD**

Ridding ourselves of worldly clutter makes room for all that is good, true, and beautiful.

Start with God and family. Lavish your time and attention on them. Hold nothing back.

And then spend more time on your other closest relationships. Don't settle for Facebook. Get out and do something together, even if it's simply a phone call.

Read good books - spiritual classics and great literature. Listen to good music – classical music, sacred music, and some contemporary Christian. Watch good programming – try *Formed* and *EWTN*. Find a few good news and information websites (preferably Christian) and have a hard and fast limit on the time you spend there.

Any activities related to your Church, faith formation and, especially, service and charitable work are worthy uses of your time and talents. St. Teresa of Avila teaches that if we want to grow in prayer we should grow in virtue (especially by serving others). It simply becomes a matter of prayer and discernment so that God can lead you to a much more fulfilling life.

## **SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR MENTAL PRAYER**

If you currently consume a great amount of secular news, entertainment, and social media, you will be amazed how much more peaceful your life becomes without it. You will be amazed how little you miss it once you get over the initial withdrawal. Simply removing this clutter from your life will also help with distractions in mental prayer. This will not happen overnight because so much of it is imprinted in your brain, but you will find over time it is easier and easier to recollect yourself and separate from the world.

A good regimen of spiritual reading and faith formation (such as bible and catechism studies and good spiritual reading) will serve to fuel your mental prayer. Particularly in the purgative age, as you are growing in faith through discursive meditation, spiritual reading and faith formation provide you with the mental material, the “grist”, for your reflection.

Because spiritual reading for your daily meditation is necessarily short – no more than a paragraph or two – it should be supplemented with additional daily spiritual reading. The two (your meditation reading and other daily spiritual reading) can be related. Perhaps you read a few chapters of the Bible as your daily spiritual reading. If a particular passage grabs your attention, make note of it, and go back to it as the reading for your daily meditation.

Your spiritual reading can also be a time to follow up on questions that arise during meditation. In our prior example we used Jesus’ teaching on anger in the Sermon on the Mount. A number of questions were raised during our hypothetical meditation (e.g. “Surely not all anger is bad, like Jesus’ cleansing of the temple. What is the difference between good and bad anger?”) Don’t just leave these questions unanswered - it’s time well spent to follow up on them.

## **MENTAL PRAYER AND AN INTEGRATED LIFE**

As stated in the first week of this series, we are a single person. We have many roles and responsibilities in life, but we have just one life. We are body and soul – spirit and matter – but we only have one nature, our human nature. Everything we are and do is integrated. The spiritual realm of our life is higher, more exalted, than the material realm, yet we exist in both realms and what we do in each matters to both.

The natural order mirrors the spiritual order and can work to reinforce it. All things that create a balanced life in the natural order will promote a healthy spiritual life. Eating a healthy diet. Getting regular exercise and a good night's sleep. Having balance between all our responsibilities, including relaxation and recreation. All of these will positively impact our spiritual life.

And the reverse holds true as well. As we give ourselves more and more to following God's rhythm of life, by developing our interior life through mental prayer, living a sacramental life, serving our neighbor, investing ourselves in the liturgical seasons of the year (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter and Ordinary Time) we will find order, peace and simplicity flowing into all aspects of our life.

## **THE 20-SECOND TACTIC AND THE GRACE OF THE PRESENT MOMENT**

Here's a simple habit tactic that can be effective to purge the bad and promote the good – make bad habits 20-seconds harder and good habits 20-seconds easier. It works like this: If you want to break the habit of constantly looking at your phone it is good to schedule when you'll look at it (e.g. "I'll give myself 5 minutes at the top of the hour"). To help yourself from cheating, make it a little harder to look at your phone by not just putting it away, but by also turning it off. Now if you're tempted to look at it, you have to wait for it to power on and that gives you a few seconds to pray to the Holy Spirit for self-control (the grace of the present moment). Creating a 20-second-ish barrier to

an unwanted habit is an effective way to give yourself time to intervene and train your brain to say “no” to the impulse.

The opposite is true for promoting good habits – remove the barriers and annoyances so that they are easier to maintain. If you want to start a habit of morning prayer (a very good habit), set yourself up for it before you go to bed. Have your bible and any other spiritual reading by your bedside and set to the proper page. If you need coffee to be able to pray, set your coffee maker the night before, and so on.

### **PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD**

Brother Lawrence, a simple and holy man in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, lived and shared this practice and captured the essence of it in a few brief letters and notes (see References). 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 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.

### **CLOSING COMMENTS**

If today’s session seems like a heavy-handed attack on “everything modern” and “having a little fun” that is because it mostly (but not entirely) is. There is simply no way to pussyfoot around this topic. *You* are too important to me and to God to waste time with watered down “it’s all good” language and half measures.

You may be familiar with the heresy of Gnosticism. If not, and in brief, Gnostics believe in a form of dualism in which only things of the spiritual realm (such as our soul) are good and everything of the material realm (our bodies and all physical creation) is evil. Christianity rejects this. God made the world to be good. Yes, it is fallen and much that is in the world can draw us into evil. But when

properly ordered, the things of this world are good, promote human happiness and draw us to God. The point of this session is NOT to peddle a puritanical view that we can't have fun and enjoy the good things of the world. But let's face it – the world has enjoyed decades of unfettered indulgence – and thus calls for no small measure of restraint.

Our current secular culture is awash in immorality that is literally engineered to worm its way into your life. If you are not consuming media, *they* are not getting your attention, your money, your vote, or whatever they are after – which is ultimately your soul. Seriously. Precious little that is produced by leading sources of media and entertainment is compatible with a healthy Christian spiritual life.

This session may also sound like it is taking all the fun out of life. Far from it! It is simply a matter of reconditioning our minds to what authentic fun is all about. It is becoming very popular these days to go on “detox” diets, getting rid of all processed foods, additives, artificial ingredients and so on. If you talk to anyone who has gone through this, they will tell you that once their body has been purged, detoxed and reordered to healthy food they can no longer enjoy junk food. The body is repulsed by it because it has been cleansed and now senses the junk food for what it is. I used to drink diet soda like water. These days I cannot go near it. My body senses the cocktail of chemicals and wants nothing to do with it. The same principle holds with modern media and entertainment. Once you purge, detox and reorder yourself to healthier options you will find life is filled with simple pleasures, fun and good humor that far outshine the flashy but shabby counterfeits the world offers in place of authentic Christian living.

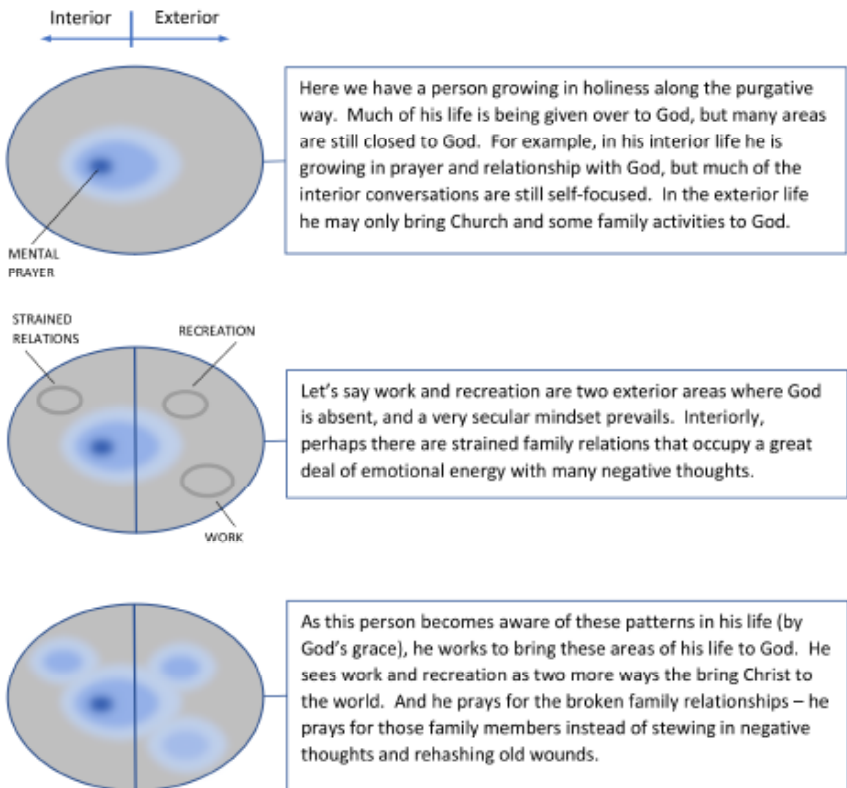
Might this be difficult? Does it take sacrifice? *Yes* - certainly, it does! But what do we say in any other area of life - no pain no gain ... the power of delayed gratification ... you get out what you put in.

So it is in our spiritual life. I say all of this with great humility and gentleness, but also with all Truth and all conviction. God is so pleased that you are making the effort with this retreat. As we said at

the outset, God does not ask anything of us that we're not prepared nor able to give, and He will always give us the grace to see it through. Bear in mind that the transformation we are talking about in this retreat is the work of our lifetime, not the work of just these 30 days. Some of the lifestyle changes may be very difficult indeed, but with God all things are possible and can happen with surprising speed.

And, by God's grace – it doesn't have to be all that hard. As with most things, taking the first step is the hardest part. Once you start purging your life of secular entertainment and social media you will experience the benefits for yourself and it will become much easier to progress.

Here is one last example of how this all works, for the visual learner.





On Day 6 we looked at how our interior life is intended to transform our entire life, and we returned to this theme in our charts at the start of today's session. The Day 6 chart of our interior and exterior (active) was idealized. We can look a little more realistically at different areas of our life, as follows.

Bear in mind the above diagrams are purely conceptual, schematic, illustrative and hypothetical; they are not in any way a rigorous mapping of the human person. That said, it is intentional in the third figure that the work, recreation and family relationships are now in contact with the core relationship with God. As we begin to sanctify different aspects of our lives we find that they are brought into our interior life and our conversation with God.

Examine your life in the context of your Plan of Life, and in the company of the Holy Spirit, and determine what next step you are called to take to remove distractions and add or adjust things in the areas of your relationship with God, your vocation, the people in your life, your service, and your work. It's that simple. Take that next small step and God will work wonders through that offering.

Please spend 10 minutes in meditation either reflecting on today's session or today's Gospel reading.

Closing Prayer:

*Lord Jesus Christ, help me to be ever more aware of Your nearness and Your great love for me. Amen.*