

Forty Weeks ~ Sacred Story



Week Twenty Four Encouragements & Wisdom

E & W reflections are additional helps for your Sacred Story prayer journey. Reflect on them ahead of your prayer exercises for the week or outside of your fifteen-minute prayer windows during the week.

Eternity

Mid-last century, two Christian scholars separated by distance and discipline identified the same threat as humanity's gravest. C.S. Lewis, a medieval scholar and literary critic from Oxford University, and Josef Pieper, a philosopher from the University of Münster, wrote works identifying loss of the examined life, contemplative rest, and God consciousness as eroding culture and destroying humankind.

Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, a series of thirty-one letters from Satan (Screwtape) to his nephew Wormwood, sketch a plan for humanity's destruction by blinding persons' awareness of the present and the eternal, creating a world devoid of reflective contemplation.ⁱ Pieper's *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, affirms that the very survival of Western society hinges on the re-establishment of contemplative rest (leisure) as the preeminent, foundational value of an enlightened and creative culture.

Each writer identifies the same critical challenge confronting the person seeking a measure of self-reflection. For Pieper, the world of *total work* is annihilating all unstructured time. This makes it impossible for human consciousness to see "the-world-as-a-whole."ⁱⁱ Lewis sees a strategist's hand in this global, evolutionary trend toward darkened conscience. The world of noise and chaos will, in the end, silence every heavenly voice as well as human sensitivity to the inner stirrings of conscience.ⁱⁱⁱ Pieper sees the erosion of a contemplative, reflective space slipping away with such "monstrous momentum" that he wonders whether its loss and the hyperactivity filling the void has demonic origins. His solution is to reclaim a space for leisure that provides "contact with those superhuman life-giving forces that can send us renewed and alive again into the busy world of work."^{iv}

A divine counter-strategy for nullifying the demonic forces that Lewis and Pieper unmask are found in the Psalmist's words: "Be still, and know that I am God." We also find them in Jesus' affirmation that "the Kingdom is among you."^v While these Scriptural prescriptions speak to us, shouting much louder are the cultural, psychological and spiritual forces arrayed against human consciousness' awakening to the *world as a whole*—to the intimate presence of God in and among us.

These overpowering forces gain strength each day. We are in fact, religious and laity alike, in the full bloom of what Thomas Merton described as violent hyper-activism.^{vi} But although the threat is still gaining force, it is of ancient origin. Strategies to confront it are as ancient as the threat itself. God, working through both the Chosen People and the Church's saints, has provided us countless spiritual resources to meet the threat head-on.

Ignatius of Loyola, born over four hundred years before Pieper and Lewis, created a method of attentive prayer called the *Examination of Conscience*. The discipline was Ignatius' way to be conscious—to stay awake—so as to reject temptations from *the enemy of human nature* and respond positively to God's graces. Ignatius incorporated the discipline into his *Spiritual Exercises* and encouraged its use beyond retreats. It became one of the principal pastoral tools of the early Jesuits in their European and missionary apostolates. It is a discipline Ignatius performed hourly and continued to practice up to his death.

Ignatius' hourly and daily prayer helped him to achieve docility and spiritual indifference. His insights draw on the energy generated by both his passionate belief in, and desire to be united with, the Trinity in the eternal Kingdom of the saints and blessed. For Ignatius, these transcendent and eternal goals are the purpose and end of human striving. We see evidence of this in both his letters and the *Constitutions'* General Examen. In these sources we hear Ignatius address the theme of the Christian life in light of this "eternal" horizon.

"We must never lose sight of the fact that we are pilgrims until we reach it (our heavenly country), and we must not let our affections tarry in the hostelries and the lands through which we pass, lest we forget our destination and lose our love of our last end. And the better to attain it, our eternal Father has given us the use and service of creatures....One can thus spend an entire lifetime seeking to pass these few days of our pilgrimage in the midst of honors, wealth, and self-satisfactions, without a thought of that which must be the cause of inestimable and unending riches, honor, prosperity, and satisfaction in our heavenly fatherland. Truly, that saying of the prophet applies to such men: "And they set at nought the desirable land." Or if they did have regard for it, they would do as much to live happily in it as they do to live contentedly in the pilgrimage in which God has placed us all on the way to that land. (Section of a letter from St. Ignatius to Anthony Enriquez: Rome; March 26, 1554).

“I have a very great desire indeed, if I may say so, to see a true and intense love of God grow in you, my relatives and friends, so that you will bend all your efforts to the praise and service of God...It is none of my business to condemn a man who in this life lies awake with plans for adding to his buildings, his income, his estate in the hope of leaving behind him a great name and reputation. But neither can I praise him, for, according to St. Paul, we ought to use the things of this world as though we used them not, and own them as though we owned them not, because the fashion of this world passes and in a moment is gone (1 Cor. 7:29-31). God grant that it may be so.” (Section of a letter of Ignatius to his brother, Martin Garcia De Onaz: Paris June 1532).

“For our profession requires that we be prepared and very much ready for whatever is enjoined upon us in our Lord and at whatsoever time, without asking for or expecting any reward in this present and transitory life, but hoping always for that life which lasts for eternity, through God’s supreme mercy.” (Taken from St. Ignatius’ *Constitutions*).



Scripture provides multiple stories valuing the contemplative pause, possibly the most familiar is Martha and Mary (Lk. 10:42). Jean-Pierre de Caussade highlights the value of contemplative rest in defining the “present moment” as a “sacrament.”^{vii} Buddhists call it mindfulness. In our age, Eckhart Tolle^{viii} and Michael Brown use techniques of a consciousness grounding in the present to achieve breakthroughs in perspective.^{ix}

Ignatius, by his hourly *Examen*, anchored his heart and consciousness in the present moment. In so doing he seemed always to know his final end, his final home. But more than just awareness of eternity Ignatius gained a wisdom grounded in a holy and holistic awareness of the material, political, human and spiritual worlds. His spiritual genius and holistic perspective compelled the Russian mystic and hermeticist Valentin Tomberg to see Ignatius' spirituality as the perfect melding of intellectuality and spirituality, a conjoining that holds faith and knowledge in balance.

If you pray the *Sacred Story Examen* regularly, and seek continual healing through reconciliation, you too, will gradually grow to value all things in light of the eternal realm to which we are all headed. Jesus reminds us constantly that we are to seek fruit that endures to eternity. Mother Theresa in her own way emphasizes the same when she told people that God calls us to be faithful, not successful. For all success needs to be measured in light of our eternal faithfulness to God, not to the pressures of this present age.

May you be inspired by the eternity to which you are destined. May you daily grow in awareness that you are only a pilgrim in this life, heading to that heavenly country that we one day hope to share with St. Ignatius and all the saints, blessed and with Christ Jesus our Lord.



ⁱ “For the present is the point at which time touches eternity. Of the present moment, and of it only, humans have an experience analogous to the experience which our Enemy has of reality as a whole; in it alone freedom and actuality are offered to them. He would therefore have them continually concerned either with eternity (which means being concerned with Him) or with the Present—either meditation on their eternal union with, or separation from, Himself, or obeying the present voice of conscience, bearing the present cross, receiving the present grace, giving thanks for the present pleasure. Our business is to get them away from the eternal and from the Present.” C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Collier Books, 1982), 103), 68. Cited hereafter as: “Lewis.”

ⁱⁱ “Or to put the matter more concretely: will it ever be possible to keep, or reclaim, some room for leisure from the forces of the total world of work? And this would mean not merely a little portion of rest on Sunday, but rather a whole ‘preserve’ of true, unconfined humanity: a space of freedom, of true learning, of attunement to the world-as-a-whole?” Josef Pieper, *Leisure, The Basis of Culture* (South Bend: St. Augustine Press, 1998), 37.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lewis, 103.

^{iv} Pieper, 35.

^v Ps. 46:10; Lk 17: 21. (Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural quotes are taken from the NAB).

^{vi} “There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence, and that is activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of this innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone and everything, is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace because it kills the root of inner wisdom

which makes work fruitful.” Thomas Merton: *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*: (New York, Doubleday, 1966), 73.

^{vii} “For the present is the point at which time touches eternity. Of the present moment, and of it only, humans have an experience analogous to the experience which our Enemy has of reality as a whole; in it alone freedom and actuality are offered to them. He would therefore have them continually concerned either with eternity (which means being concerned with Him) or with the Present-either meditation on their eternal union with, or separation from, Himself, or obeying the present voice of conscience, bearing the present cross, receiving the present grace, giving thanks for the present pleasure. Our business is to get them away from the eternal and from the Present.” C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Collier Books, 1982), 103), 68. Cited hereafter as: “Lewis.”

^{viii} Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now* (Vancouver: Namaste Publishing, 2004). See also: Andrew Ryder, "The Sacrament of Now," *The Way 2* (April 2007); and Tolle's, *A New Earth*, (New York: Dutton, 2005).

^{ix} Brown's method accomplishes this much more systematically and effectively than Tolle, and does so in ways quite synchronous with Ignatius' *Examen*. Michael Brown, *The Presence Process: A Healing Journey into Present Moment Awareness* (Vancouver: Namaste Publishing, 2005).