

Forty Weeks ~ Sacred Story



Week Thirty One 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.

In our initial Seattle project at two thirds through the Forty Weeks, some of our participants offered reflections on the spiritual benefits received through Forty Weeks *Sacred Story* prayer. The reflections cover many different and important themes:

Awareness and Attention to Reality
Finding Balance in Life
Concern for Others
Difficulties Encountered
Gratitude and Healings
Intimacy and Friendship with God
God's Love and Mercy
Peace and Hope
The Structure and Routine of Prayer
Appreciation of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist
Growth in Self-Understanding

For these next weeks, please find your encouragement and wisdom in reflecting on the spiritual benefits received in praying with *Sacred Story*. This week's reflections cover the theme of Difficulties Encountered. Ignatius became a master at discernment because as his conversion deepened, he faced multiple crises he had to navigate. God helped him through these times, however, as God continues to do for anyone opening his or her heart to Christ.

Anyone who engages their faith and prays daily will confront various crises as growth takes place. Difficulties are part and parcel of the spiritual path. No one should be discouraged by difficulties encountered. Remember, Ignatius would say you are always either in a state of spiritual consolation or spiritual desolation. Difficulties encountered, if approached with faith

and patience, often yield the greatest spiritual growth.

I will list the difficulties some have encountered and then give a response. This will be your encouragement this week. Ignatius was not troubled by people with spiritual difficulties. He was compassionate and pragmatic at the same time. When difficulties do arise, the goal is to learn their source and understand them. This is how growth takes place along your path of *Sacred Story*. God is healing the world one life at a time while he writes our sacred story.

DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED

1. Because my life is so busy and I have experienced some very difficult family issues during the last several months, it is often a struggle to complete the prayer exercises every day. However, I am following the material and gradually making definite spiritual progress. I haven't made the commitment to monthly confession but I have been going to confession. It hasn't been as satisfying as the whole life confession but I haven't found a spiritual advisor yet. That is difficult for me to get done.

Response: The stresses and busyness of life often erode our energy and time. Looking for time in a busy day for a new discipline, simply takes time. The fact that you are making "definite spiritual progress" indicates the benefit of the prayer. The benefit can also act as an encouragement for you to find the time to pray. You can try putting the prayer time on your appointment calendar so you can tell folks: "I have an appointment now and will get back to you." Also, regular confession, when done with planning and with an eye to your spiritual growth, is a great grace. The whole life confession is a special time just like honeymoons are a special time. The special grace of a whole-life confession is a clear sign that "this is the right thing to do." You will not always have the grace of that first time, but the grace is always present and moving you forward in your spiritual journey.

2. I feel like I am doing a rotten job. I am about 2 weeks behind on the exercises. The meditation is hard for me and I rarely seem to be doing it properly. On the plus side, I have found the affirmation "Never make a decision based on fear" to be very helpful.

Response: The fact that you "feel" you are doing a rotten job does not make it true. Remember to look at the impact a feeling is having. Does it give you hope and faith? If not, and instead it creates upset, anxiety and loss of faith and hope, the "feeling" is not from God. On the other hand, you may be engaging the exercises with a mindset of trying to be perfect. That could also be creating a sense of burden. It may be that you simply need to be more patient with doing a fair job and being a bit behind. Do you think God is upset at that? No! The feelings of "doing a rotten job" could lead you to simply "stop" this practice of prayer. Remember, this urge to "stop it" was what Ignatius wanted to do when he got fed up with his obsessive confession habit. He finally did stop his habit of confessing past sins, but he did not stop confession. He learned that he needed to do the confession differently. Growth was achieved. In light of these two things you mention, it makes perfect sense why the affirmation that is very helpful is about not making decisions in a time of fear or upset. See the connections? Peace to you!

3. It has opened me up to forgiveness and presence, but at this time I'm feeling very stuck - like I'm hitting my head against a brick wall and getting nowhere.

*The first thing to do in all these situations is to **turn to Christ and say** something like: “Lord, I feel really stuck right now - like I am hitting my head against a wall and getting nowhere. **Help me!**” You can also say the same thing and have your last request be: “If there is something I am doing that is getting in the way of my growth, show me and help me with it because I can’t see it on my own.” Then wait for the help. When you do this, you give Jesus permission to help you by admitting you can’t save yourself from whatever it is that is causing your difficulty. God will always come through. Not in the way you might expect, because it will be better than you expect. Always ask for help! Always ask for help! ALWAYS ASK FOR HELP!*

4. I have frequently thought about stopping Sacred Story because I am not faithful or consistent in following my promised 15 minutes a day or if I do take 15 minutes, I don't have the Sacred Story materials with me (most common!) and muddle through with what I think I remember. And then, suddenly, one day I had a wonderful moment of insight! It has made a great difference in how I relate to the program now. I will continue doing the best I can knowing I am not a model practitioner, and deciding that it is OK.

Response: Good, you are learning an important lesson. Anyone who is honest with themselves will know that they are never perfectly faithful or consistent. But lack of fidelity and inconsistency are no reason to back away from something that has proven to be so beneficial. Insights come when they are needed but they can only come if we stay engaged with God, however imperfectly. Lesson learned!

5. I love all the materials and feel that they are probably extremely beneficial to most people. Why can't I seem to grasp hold of and do the daily requirements? Does this mean that God is not happy with me for some reason? I wish I could learn to be grateful even in the midst of great suffering. I can't seem to get my mind off of the suffering.

Response: The daily prayer lessons are something you are still learning. This prayer is inviting you into a real relationship with Christ. You are learning the rituals of a relationship so you can incorporate it in your own life. THIS TAKES TIME! Early on I used the example of learning how to drive a stick shift: you have to really think about what you are doing and it feels you might never get the hang of it—brakes, clutch, shift, gas—yikes! Then one day, you are talking to your friend in the passenger seat next to you, listening to the news on the radio and thinking about the day, all without even paying attention to the mechanics of driving. You are doing it “by heart.” This will happen with your prayer. Just keep applying yourself to learn the ritual and the meaning behind the ritual, and one day you will be praying “by heart.” There are different types of suffering—physical, spiritual, emotional, psychological. The type of suffering needs to be discerned and then a source of the suffering must be identified. Is there something you can do about your type of suffering? Talk to God about it. Some forms of suffering are things we have to live with due to the impact of Original Sin in the world. Christ entered human history to save us from our suffering. The fullness of that promise does not happen this side of eternity. Yet, Christ entered into our suffering and knows the depths of it. You can thank Christ for entering into the human condition and knowing what you suffer. You can also thank

Christ for how powerfully he will work through what you suffer. When you focus on Christ's promise to transform your suffering into life, then you take the focus off yourself and place it on God. This can lead to gratitude. So instead of focusing on your present suffering, focus instead on thanking God for how powerfully he will transform your suffering into blessings for you and others. The enemy of human nature wants you to focus on the suffering and lose hope. Christ wants you to focus on him and how he can transform suffering into blessing (the crucifixion) so your hope is strengthened. You have a choice on where you place your attention. Choose life, choose Christ.

6. *(Sacred Story)* provides a language and process to further explore and build a relationship with God and understand better one's history and development, and how God's love and presence gives life and heals. At the same time, it can sometimes feel like the process creates distance from God or makes one feel less worthy.

Response: It is probably better to focus your attention on the elements that help you build your relationship with God. Logically, a form of prayer that helps you draw closer to God can't also create distance from God. The prayer may at times bring into focus elements in your life where you have traditionally felt unworthy and this makes you "feel" distant from God. But God is not distant from you. You might consider if God is inviting you to visit experiences you have always had where you have "felt" unworthy. Why would God do this? So he can bring healing and hope. Ignatius felt unworthy too and that is why he tried to save himself by making a perfect confession. He failed in this and finally had to confront the God who loved him in his weakness. He knew he was unworthy and was overwhelmed by the God who loved him in his unworthiness. He said late in life that he did not think there had been in the history of the Church one who had sinned so much and that had also been give so many graces by God. We can't earn God's love. God loves us no matter what. We have to confront the awesome reality that God thinks we are worthy of love, even in our weakness and sinfulness.

7. I don't know. I am very distracted now with a demanding new job and have not participated in the daily exercises for a few weeks. Honestly, I feel like there is too much emphasis on sin and reconciliation rather than on the positives of a loving God within us.

Response: Ignatius' spirituality invites one to confront the sinfulness in one's life to such a degree that the individual is finally confronted with the truth that he or she can't save themselves. The irony is that we really don't truly experience the love of God unless and until we make this discovery. The incredible fact is that we have been saved by God's love because sin destroyed our lives and our hope for eternity. In his Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius suggests that someone who can't access the reality of sin in his or her life should sit in a dark room to feel the darkness within. Ignatius' is adamant that we know our sin in light of God's love. God's love will mean little to someone who does not know they need it. The engine of evangelization in the history of Christianity is fueled by individuals who knew they were lost and in Christ, found hope, peace and salvation. So Ignatian spirituality is not an either or (either sin or God's love) but a both and (sin and God's love saving us). A majority of the pastoral work of the early Jesuits was teaching lay people how to pray the examination of conscience prayer and encouraging them to practice frequent confession. Sacred Story prayer is trying to update this early work of the Society of

Jesus to assist the Church in her work of the New Evangelization.

8. I'm feeling even more frustrated. In the beginning I felt like I was working towards something, preparing for the meditation and greater insights and deeper relationship with God, but now I feel even less connected. I still find my mind wandering more and more during my prayer sessions and I feel less motivated because I don't feel like I am connecting with God in any way. It's more me thinking about God then relating and conversing with Him.

Response: Well an easy response is to say: stop thinking about God and start relating and conversing with God. In the beginning you were working toward something and you still are. Just because you "feel" less connected does not mean you are less connected. Did you ever think you might finally be getting close to those realities in your life that have always made you feel disconnected from God? There is an insight coming but maybe you have not walked far enough in your prayer relationship with Christ to discover it. The fact that one's mind wanders in prayer can mimic the reality of a human relationship where one person feels distant from another. This can be because the one who feels distant has something on their heart they need/want to share but for whatever reason, are unable. This unspoken issue makes the relationship lose depth and connection. On the other hand, you can follow where your mind is wandering and allow yourself to talk with God about where you are wandering in your thoughts. You have the choice to ask God: "God, my mind is wandering again and I can't focus or get an insight. Are my mental wanderings important? Can you help me understand if there is something in my heart getting in the way of feeling connected to you? If there is, can you help me discover it because I can't do it on my own." Don't be too proud to ask God for help.

9. This week I have been battling with anxiety and depression related to my work. The anxiety and stress generates fear about my employment. The fear causes me to perform even worse and cause a spiraling greater fear. I believe if I can have peace in my heart, I can perform better in my work.

Response: These are the very things you are encouraged to bring to your prayer. Talk with God about your fears and ask Christ why you experience them. Fear is not from God, but from the enemy of human nature. All of us fear not being in control of our lives. Ignatius was terrified of not being in control of his life and the depression and fear of not being able to make a perfect confession made him feel like ending his life. He discovered ultimately that the fear was grounded in his pride. He had to free-fall into the abyss of God's love. Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement, named her autobiography "A Harsh and Dreadful Love." Trusting God with our lives can feel harsh and dreadful — a purifying fire. True holiness is not a Hallmark card. It involves a stripping of the ego—our selfishness — and walking oftentimes in spaces of darkness because we don't know where we are going. Christ had to endure this in his own life. In a complete stripping of self, he had to fall into the abyss of the Father's love. Let Christ be with you as you encounter your fears. It won't necessarily "feel" blissful, but it is real and is leading you to the peace of eternity.

10. I got interested in searching for other Catholic views of the story of Adam and Eve. I guess scientifically speaking I have always had an issue with it. And since I have a degree in Science, I always look at it from a scientific viewpoint and a religious viewpoint. I guess I originally felt that they were real people in history and this story more or less represented a real event. Now I am not sure I agree with that viewpoint, especially from the Monogenism concept. I can't envision how this will hold up to scientific scrutiny. I think I could accept the concept of man in general sense, being misguided by the devil to not follow the will of God which required Jesus Christ to atone for. Whether man was immortal before the fall, is also a difficult concept scientifically. Based on the 1993 instruction of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, it appears there is real wiggle room here. I can still make the story work metaphorically. Much of the bible appears to have historical credibility. I never got a grown up interpretation of the Adam and Eve story in my catechism classes in grade school. So I would love to hear you present your interpretation. The story you are conveying in your lesson plans is the literal interpretation of the bible. I did wonder why you put that question in your survey though.

Response: Thanks for getting interested in the topic. My scientific ideas are still forming on the issue of the Genesis account. Our species is about 200,000 years old. Science has proven someone they refer to as mitochondrial Eve. In other words, the genetic record proves that all of us are descended from a first set of parents or a primeval mother if you prefer. This discovery was I believe first made in the 1980's. The science community is not sure if this was initially a small group or only two. Most likely, we will never know. From the science of genetics, cellular biology, etc., I do believe that the extraordinarily complex nature of the human person could not have randomly evolved. Also from the "science" side, the interplay between our spiritual/emotional being and our physical nature is so extraordinary, that the Church's statement that God willed human nature to be both body and soul makes perfect sense to me - scientific sense, theological sense, logical sense.

I am not presenting a literal or a fundamentalist view of the Bible story in my writing. I am taking the doctrine of the Church and trying to explain the nature of the Fall, the cause of the Fall, and the consequences of the Fall from a theological perspective. When I speak about a three-phase process to the Original Sin, I am taking the language of Scripture and trying to make theological sense of how temptation evolves in the human conscience by looking at the Genesis account of the temptation. No where do I talk about the literal story of Eve being first to take an apple and then giving it to Adam. I am talking about "the taking" of something that was not intended to be taken (pride) and that taking was a deception to remove the complete unity between our first parents and God. By saying our first parents I leave open if this was a set of two people or a small group. But some tragedy transpired—an event took place that destroyed God's plan and that destroyed relationships on all levels: within ourselves, between ourselves and others, between ourselves and God, and between male and female. The historical record of the on-going destruction speaks for itself.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that "the account of the fall in Genesis ... uses figurative language, but affirms a primeval event, a deed that took place at the beginning of the

history of man. Revelation gives us the certainty of faith that the whole of human history is marked by the original fault freely committed by our first parents.” So as I reflected, when sin entered the world, so did death. Death, sickness, disease etc. is the result of sin. We were made immortal and by sin, lost that gift. The terrible tragedy transpired that called for the history of redemption. The Christ event is a response to the event of the Fall. The Christ event (crucifixion and resurrection) is the promise, not just of a restoration of what was lost, but of a new heavens and a new earth. We had to be saved “from death” and Christ accomplished this victory for all of us. How did the actual events of the Fall transpire? One day I hope to discover what happened along with a trillion other things as well. Keep thinking and reading. This is important stuff.

*For those wanting to do deeper research, you might look to: *The Cell's Design: How Chemistry Reveals the Creator's Artistry* by Fazal Rana and *The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist's Case for the Existence of the Soul* by Mario Beauregard.*

