

Forty Weeks ~ Sacred Story



Week Thirty Six 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.

Understanding Temptations of a more Subtle Nature

The relentless mission of the enemy of human nature is to turn you from God. In pre-conversion and early conversion states of life, that is easily accomplished. Knowing where you hurt and where your heart is broken, the enemy supports your immersion in sensual delights, mental distractions and addictive behaviors as salve for your pain. For those who slight you, touching your tender ego, he facilitates your outrage and anger. He encourages you to hold on to grudges and makes it easy to justify not forgiving those who have hurt you. He covers your laziness in avoiding prayer and sacramental obligations with excuses that the Church is out of touch with the times. He covers workaholism with the badge of industriousness and efficiency.

He masks your self-centeredness as the virtue of independence. He celebrates all sexual impulses as authentic expressions of human nature. He manipulates your fears and anxieties at every possible opportunity. He brands holiness and innocence the characteristics of the simpleton and the fanatic. The profane and the immodest he declares glamorous, sophisticated and enlightened. He certainly does not want you to turn your heart to God. But if you do turn to God, and by God's grace commit to a life of faith and Gospel values, the enemy will not give up.

Imagine a Catholic couple with two small children and a third on the way. They have been married for eleven years and they are at a difficult juncture in their life. The stresses of marriage and children are pushing each of them to grow in challenging areas. They had no idea of how much time and attention children need. Both are successful in their own right with their different careers. They find a great deal of energy in the accolades of career success. They find less energy in the day-to-day selflessness it takes to raise kids and keep a house.

With a third child on the way, it will not be possible for both to continue on their separate career trajectories. One of them will have to move to the next level. The other will have to step off the ladder. Each is reluctant to surrender the dream of career success that seemed possible when they got married. Neither is willing to surrender the dream. Each wants the other to make the career sacrifice. Each experiences fear and anger when contemplating surrendering their career ambitions. Can I (or will I) ever be happy? Each is immature in different ways. Each of them must deal with issues from the past. The career *ambitions* for each were founded on certain insecurities, old wounds and hurts from early in life.

The pressure of the impasse has brought them to a crisis. They are finding more to dislike about each other. Home life has fallen into a bit of a depressing routine as a result. Things can't go on like this. Each knows that, but they don't know how to break the impasse. Neither is budging on the career dream. At a parish event, they have an argument that brings their relationship difficulties in view of several of their married friends. One of the couples who witnessed the argument is at their house a week after the argument. The friends speak about a Marriage Encounter weekend they attended. Describing how powerful it was in getting their marriage on track and opening communication lines, they persuade the couple to sign up for the next Encounter.

They are reluctant but sign up. They attend, and to make a long story short, it is life-transforming for both of them. They each get in touch with significant issues from the past. They laugh and cry. They are able to listen to each other. Faith and prayer becomes more central to their relationship, just like when they met. In the months after the Encounter, they reach a decision on who will step off the career ladder. The one making the sacrifice will get the Ph.D. they always dreamed of when the last of the three kids starts high school.

The Marriage Encounter profoundly transformed a struggling marriage into one that was rock solid. They decide they want to help other couples just as they were helped. Going to the pastor of their parish, they got involved in Marriage Encounter. In three years' time, they are state leaders for Marriage Encounter. Leadership is providing all the energy the old careers did. But this was doing something for people's faith. They were helping save marriages and getting more involved in their faith than ever before: a win-win.

But they missed something. In the three years from casual involvement to becoming state leaders, the time commitment was greater than when they were both working two careers. Things were getting left undone at home. Crisis couple's counseling was eating into dinner times and family activities. Kids' events had to be missed due to leadership obligations. The national Marriage Encounter convention was the same weekend as one of the kids' state sports playoffs. They were to be recognized as one of the top ten leadership couples in the nation for Marriage Encounter. They promised their son to attend the next playoff. "We know you kids understand how important this is for your folks."

By the fourth year of their involvement as leaders, the same fault lines were starting to appear that first led them to Marriage Encounter. They had not seen it coming. Neither felt willing to surrender the good work of Marriage Encounter. People depended on them. Marriages

were being saved. But their own marriage was starting to fray around the edges. They were both constantly tired from late night phone calls and weekends away. It seemed impossible to step back from their obligations—they were both too important to the program. In the stress and fatigue of the last year, one of them had a significant emotional relationship with person they were counseling. Once this came to light, it created more tension in their relationship. As they were experiencing more and more tension, it was impossible to be honest about it. They were after all, a model couple in Marriage Encounter. Their self-esteem was anchored to their leadership successes, just like it previously had been to their career tracks.

Can you see how the “undetected roots” of their pride and narcissism surfaced in a wholly new way? It was very difficult to see because they were doing faith-based work. The enemy of human nature, knowing he had lost on the more obvious appeals to pride and narcissism, entered the scene in new, more subtle way. It took four years but the enemy was patient and it paid off. They were each hooked by old issues that still needed healing and conversion. How similar this story is to St. Ignatius’. He, too, was tricked by the same temptations under a new guise. This is why he learned to track where a seemingly positive inspiration or choice was leading.

You will be well served by going back to Week Fifteen and reviewing the lesson on passive and aggressive narcissism. You can find the charts for these two forms of narcissism in the E & W for Week Twenty-One. Vanity is the enemy’s favorite sin. But we have nothing to fear. The Lord is on our side. This is one of the reasons why doing a daily *Sacred Story* prayer is so vital. You can catch the enemy’s tricks if you daily open in prayer to God and learn how to listen to your heart.

