**St. Francis de Sales**

**Introduction**

I’m delighted to introduce St. Frances de Sales because he is a warm and wonderful friend for you. He’s not nearly as famous as his namesake, St. Francis of Assisi. But our St. Francis (de Sales) is a spiritual dynamo. He richly deserves the praise: “St. Francis de Sales forms a school of spirituality by himself alone”.[[1]](#endnote-1) To help us love God more dearly, our St. Francis wrote *Introduction to the Devout Life*. In his introductory prayer, he reveals his loving heart. “Ah, sweet Jesus, my Lord, my Savior, and my God, behold me here prostrate before your majesty, as I pledge and consecrate this work to your glory. By your blessing, give life to these words, so that the souls for whom they were written may receive from them the sacred inspirations I desire for them. In particular I implore your infinite mercy for me, so that while I point out the way of devotion to others, I myself may not be rejected, 1 Cor 9:27..., but may forever sing a canticle of triumph, and with my whole heart be a faithful witness in the hazards of this mortal life. Live, Jesus! Live, Jesus! Yes, Lord Jesus, live and reign in our hearts forever and ever. Amen”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Francis assures us: “I write about the devout life, even though I myself am not devout. I dearly desire to be devout, and this desire encourages me to instruct you. … giving enables us to receive.” St. Francis shows how down-to-earth he is. He desires to share devout life with us. But why does he deny that he is devout? It is because he is not as devout as he desires to be. He is not as devout as God deserves. God is infinitely beyond us. But He infinitely attracts us, and deserves infinite devotion. That’s why St. Francis admits that he falls short of all the devotion God deserves. But Francis donates every bit of his devotion to God. God appreciates this total gift, and increases that devotion for Francis. Therefore it overflows to us all. What a great gift! When he gives us devotion, St. Francis lives his devotion more completely. His devout giving fires up his own devotion. When he encourages us to grow more devout, he grows more devout. He receives by giving. This donation feedback makes St. Francis a dynamo of devotion.

Our own personal experience of growing-by-giving reveals this feedback. Our giving-to-grow reflects St. Francis’ dynamic. All of us learn this feedback from Christ. Jesus teaches this double effect of gaining by giving. His life flows out precisely in this loving dynamic. Specifically, Luke 6:38 describes the result of giving: the giver receives more than he gives (running over). Christ reveals this loving process of ever-increasing by giving. He teaches us to love in the way that He loved. It is true that our own efforts never reach Christ’s infinite love. But when we imitate Jesus, we open our hearts to accept more of His love. His love unites us with God because His love is God. So when we accept God’s love, we accept God Himself. We accept Love. He Himself nurtures our limited love, invigorating it. When we pour His love out to our neighbors, His life of love grows in us and in them. St. Francis de Sales learns this expansion from Christ, and shares that learning with us. He wants us to welcome Jesus, so that Love grows in our hearts. Loving is supremely simple. First accept the Love that Jesus gives. Then thank Him for that Love. Then confirm that Love by giving it to others.

To live this Love is to unite with God, and thus to become perfect. For Francis, “perfect” means a two-fold condition. First we overcome our alienation from God. This struggle can be considered negative, because we eliminate the sin which separates us from God. Then we strive to achieve the positive reunion with our Creator. Francis helps us take steps to achieve both negative and positive goals by developing virtues. Virtues are developments of our powers to act. At first, our powers are weak, like a baby’s muscle. With practice, that muscle can become powerful. Virtue is powerful moral muscle to reliably perform good acts. Its reliability makes it a habit. Therefore, virtue is a habit of doing moral good.

Our most important act is reuniting with God. So Francis affirms that this union is our ultimate destiny. It is the only worthwhile goal for us. That’s why unique gifts of spiritual life uniting with God attract us so powerfully. In the depths of our soul, we are sure that God made us to be with Him. We are sure that we are not there yet. Saints who are advancing toward God often do unusual things. For example, we thrill to their ecstasies, or their floating in air. But Francis insists that these “are not virtues. Rather they are rewards that God gives for virtues. [They are] small samples of the delights of future life. … We should not aspire to such graces, because they are in no way necessary for our only aim of loving and serving God well.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Isn’t it good news that we don’t need these unique gifts? Instead, we need to love and serve God. That fact inspires Francis to say: “For me, I neither know, nor have experienced, any other Christian perfection than that of loving God with all our heart, and our neighbor as ourselves. Every other perfection without this one is a false perfection.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Francis emphatically warns us to avoid pretensions. Though these put-ons look like perfections, they are false. Longing to float, or to hear voices, wastes our energy by seeking superficial appearances. Francis warns us to quit promoting ourselves, and start loving others. If we try to look better than our neighbors, we are not serving them. Christ gives us His excellent example of loving and serving the least of His neighbors. So we should imitate Jesus by loving and serving others. If we do as Jesus did, we will be so different from self-promoters, dominators, and rip-off artists, that people will be amazed. This is the shock and awe of living Christ’s life.

Amazed people will say that we are good servants. But we should reply as Jesus did: “There is only one who is good”, Mt 19:17. Christ means that God is good by nature, intrinsically. In stark contrast, creatures are “unprofitable servants”, Lk 17:10. Jesus means that whatever good we possess comes directly from our Creator. We can apply this good to grow, but “God gives the increase”, 1 Col 3:6. This is the simple truth. It crops up again and again, in spite of pretentious people who insist that they make themselves good. Humility is truth. Francis is so truthful that his humility shines brilliantly. No wonder that millions of people accepted his good example, and learned devotion from him. He lived the Gospel so intensely that he became remarkably devout. He enjoyed devotion so much that he loves sharing it with us. He challenges us to accept what he so generously shares. But our responses vary from person to person, and from time to time.

God never clones. Each person is unique, quite different from all others. That’s why their devotion is so different, person to person. Francis was uniquely gentle and peaceful, always helping people to cooperate. He devoutly desired to reconcile everyone. He excelled at pacification. That virtue was in short supply in Geneva. Calvin organized bitter opposition to the Church there. So it was a hot-bed of animosity. Francis cooled that cauldron. He attracted people, even Calvinists, because he was so kind, so sweet, so loving. Francis uniquely imitated Christ the Good Shepherd. Jesus taught him to sooth the scattered sheep, to bring them home by merciful love. Francis soothed them by finding each one’s best qualities. Amazed that he cared enough to learn about them, people flocked to him. Emphasizing their strengths fostered confidence in each one, and helped each person improve. Francis warmly welcomed each individual, overlooking his faults until the time was right to correct them. That’s why Francis will shine for all eternity as a bright example of mercy for us to follow. To know him is to love him. So let’s learn more.

**Overview of His Life**

Francis first saw daylight at Savoy, in France, in 1567. Savoy is in the Southeast of France, bordering the Alps. Spectacular scenery seemed to urge Francis upward toward God. He was a bright and energetic student, excelling at the Jesuit prep school in Paris. With this impressive education, he could succeed anywhere. He attended Padua University, in Italy, on the other side of the Alps. There he earned doctorates in civil and canon law. In 1593, the Bishop of Geneva ordained him a priest. His abilities and achievements naturally destined him for Church leadership. Because of his energetic and effective evangelization of Calvinists in their very own stronghold, the Bishop ordained Francis to be his auxiliary. In 1602, he became Bishop of Geneva. Until 1622, when he died, he led the Catholics in this contested city, keeping them together in spite of Protestant attacks. God’s blessing of merciful love converted many of those Puritans who had followed Calvin into violent revolt against the Church. Besides his primary responsibility of administering a large diocese, Francis preached often, wrote soul-inspiring books, and provided spiritual direction for many influential people. With St. Jean Frances de Chantal, he founded the semi-cloistered religious institute for nuns: the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin.

His exceptionally full life radiated divine inspiration and personal holiness. Francis let the Holy Spirit shine through his heart to convert bitter Calvinists in their very own fortress. His holiness attracted most people, even sworn enemies of the Church. This beacon of Christ’s light attracted an astounding number of enemies to return home to the Church. This observable number of conversions assures us that the Holy Spirit flowed through Francis. Because he welcomed Jesus into his heart, the Spirit of Christ radiated to everyone within range. No wonder that Pope Pius IX, in 1887, declared Francis a Doctor of the Church, focusing attention for everyone on our outstanding teacher and saint.[[5]](#endnote-5)

As Bishop, Francis brought Christ to a wide audience. He led the people by leading their priests. While leading them, he noticed that priests did not encourage ordinary people to excel. Instead, priests encouraged a stogy conforming to basic rules. Francis realized that the Baptismal gift of Christ-life must be lived more enthusiastically. That’s when Francis expanded his teaching of spirituality from priests and religious to include all people. He started preaching beyond the choir to the congregation. This shift to ordinary people, encouraging them to develop rich spiritual lives, established him as a Doctor of the Church. Following his lead, other teachers developed spiritual practices for people in the pews. Francis started a vital trend which we can continue today.

Beside expanding spiritual practices to lay folk, Francis gave outstanding good example. His virtues illuminated his time. The leader of all Catholics in the Calvinist fortress of Geneva would necessarily be the primary target of vicious attacks. Enemies did what came naturally. When battered by these outrages, Frances was so like Jesus that many of his enemies relented, and even converted. They returned to the Church because they saw Christ in him. Jesus inspired Francis to be the most merciful man of his time. In the midst of the animosity abounding around him, his mercy was a homing beacon for all people. Therefore, Michael de la Bedoyere calls Francis “the greatest of the saints, at least for modern times. ... He reflected most directly the character and way of Christ our Lord”.[[6]](#endnote-6)

These examples illustrate that Francis imitated Jesus so well that he became another Christ. His enemies recognized this identity, and marveled. Many even reversed their revolt against the Church, and became devout Catholics. These extraordinary conversions teach us how close Francis was to Jesus. From his early years, Francis accepted Christ’s invitation to unite with Him. Years of practice made him so intimately one with Jesus that divine light radiated from him. That radiation is not physical, but spiritual. Francis’ actions are so like Christ’s that observers see Jesus in Francis. Simply, these actions reflect the flow of divine love through a saint who accepts God’s gifts, and gives them to others.

This radiation is not noisy. It is not a self-promoting drama of sound and fury, like a Hollywood production. In fact, nothing stunning flowed from Francis. He did not offer original ideas, as Augustine or Thomas did. Instead, his genius illuminated ordinary life. Francis saw Jesus becoming one of us, doing what we do, and sanctifying ordinary acts. For 30 years Jesus did common things. Even during His 3 years of active ministry, He walked from place to place as we do. Therefore, Frances teaches steady progress to God, step by step, through the dust of simple, every-day, activity. Emphasizing daily events, Francis shifts our attention to tasks we can accomplish. His unique genius is to show how Jesus sanctifies daily events. Imitating Christ, Francis brings heaven down to earth.

Francis noticed how Christ applied God’s love to daily activity. Just as Jesus walked on dusty stones, bringing God to us as we are, Francis seeks divine love here on earth. This divine life invigorates all people to live in Christ. After all, God incarnated. He came to earth to do common things. Down in the dirt with us, doing ordinary things, He lifts us to heaven. All of us can follow Jesus, if we accept the simplicity that Christ taught. Francis echoes this divine simplicity. In our time of explosive sensory presentations, simplicity looks boring. Actually, simplicity reassures us. Simplicity replaces Hollywood hype with reliable reality. Take a moment to remember how disappointed we are after the hype fades, almost immediately. Sensory productions require strenuous advertising because they are fake. They have no real value, so they demand outrageous advertising. When we catch wind of this deception, we are so devastated that we might finally swear off that fakery. Then we can strive once more to see the value of ordinary events. Christ arrived in the most ordinary of events. He lived right there in the dust with us. He was not bored, because He loved us. He loves us still, and invites us to love Him and our neighbors. When we love, we escape boredom, and rise into glory.

Francis promotes this escape and rise. Behind the ordinary, Francis sees the divine. He finds the font of love which Jesus provides in the Holy Spirit. Then Francis helps us to peer past the veil of superficial repetition, and peek into God’s life unfolding here below. Francis learned this vital lesson from Jesus, our perfect teacher. Intermediate teachers influenced Francis also. Augustine, Aquinas, Ignatius, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Genoa, and Philip Neri, all taught Francis tremendous truths. We will not trace their teaching. Instead, we will dive directly into Francis. He focuses on daily acts, to learn directly from common events.

His *Introduction to the Devout Life* provides practical wisdom that Francis wrote for people who are busy making a living, people like us. We can find Jesus among us, walking our common road, as He did two thousand years ago. For thirty years he did ordinary things, quite like we do. Francis helps us identify Christ among us, doing what we do. Francis provides practical tips, right here in the nitty-gritty of daily life. He wants everyone to be devout, no matter what our job in life. So he writes for us ordinary people. He leads the way to help common people advance into uncommon holiness, by doing common things. Let’s follow his unique path by looking deep into his soul.

**A Deeper Look at His Life**

Like all Adam’s children, Francis had to struggle to control himself. At first, he was impatient. But he so completely overcame his passion to command, that his friends accused him of “being too easy-going”.[[7]](#endnote-7) An example of that “going easy” is his advice in a letter to St. Jane de Chantal. When she grieved for the death of her youngest daughter: he advised: “why not weep a little over our dead, since the Spirit of God not only permits, but invites it”.[[8]](#endnote-8) We see the Spirit of God inviting Jesus to cry, even to groan, over his dead friend Lazarus, Jn 11:23. Francis himself wept when his sister Jeanne de Sales died. He wrote of his sadness to St. Jane de Chantal: “Alas, my daughter, I am but a man, and nothing more. My heart is saddened more than I could ever have thought. But the truth is that my mother’s and your distress have both greatly contributed towards my grief, for I feared for your heart and that of my mother. But … praise be to Jesus! I shall ever be on the side of divine Providence, which does all things well and orders all for the best.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

We see his profound sensitivity because Francis worries more about his mother and Jane than about himself. If he had his way, his sister would still be alive and flourishing. But he admits that Jesus knows best, and arranges everything for the ultimate best. This is particularly true for events that we don’t understand. In our time of hard-hearted efficiency, we must look deeper into Francis, to better understand his sensitivity. Crying seems overdone to us. Perhaps that is because we waste so much time denying anything that makes us look weak. Francis rejects our common escape into denial. Instead, he is strong enough to endure the full impact of his beloved sister’s death. He does not hide his overwhelming sorrow from anyone, last of all from himself. Why? It is because he is not afraid of grief. His total openness to reality, good and bad, enables him to grieve fully. Incidentally, full grieving enables him to recover entirely.

His next message is even more drastic for us, because it reveals more sensitivity than our society allows. When his mother died: “I had the courage to give her the last blessing, to close her eyes and mouth, and to give her the last kiss of peace at the moment she passed away. After that, my heart swelled, and I wept over this good mother, more than I have since I was ordained. But it was without spiritual bitterness, thanks be to God.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

These days it is popular to say that we are sensitive. But we probably wouldn’t do what Francis did. His living grief displays profound emotion. Probably Francis harmonized with other people’s emotions precisely because he harmonized with God. He could free his emotions from restrictions because he loved God without restrictions. He accepted God as Love Himself. Then he began to live the love he accepted. Living God’s love leads to agreeing more completely with Love. When he wrote the sentence we’re discussing, he was advanced deeply into God’s love.

Perhaps this is why Francis was more personally involved than our popular mechanical interactions allow. His responses are much more loving. The examples given here provide a glimpse into Francis. We gain a glimmer of his luminous soul. His love is so great that every peek into his depths rewards us. We gain confidence that other people can love as Jesus did. We ache for Christ’s love, and find it in Francis. Therefore, we trust what he wrote for us.

His profound friendship with St. Jane de Chantal is legendary. He exquisitely expresses his devotion to her. “I believe that there are no souls in the world who cherish feelings more cordial, tender, and, saying it in all good faith, more loving than mine. It has pleased God to fashion my heart that way. … I love souls that are independent, strong, and not effeminate. This great tenderness confuses the heart, disquiets and distracts it from loving prayer to God, and prevents entire resignation and the total extinction of self-love. How does it come about that I feel such things, I, who am the most tender-hearted man in the world, as you, most dear mother, know? In truth, however, I do feel them. But it is a marvel how I make all this fit together, for it is in my mind to love nothing at all except God, and all souls for God.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

Of the thousands of people he knew, none were as tender-hearted as Francis was. He knew the depths of his soul, and found there a heart loving strong souls who were powerfully virtuous, proved by their determined service of God’s people. Francis describes how he could be lovingly merciful in a very masculine way. His love was powerful. But putting his love into practice was difficult. Among many reasons for this difficulty, the main one is that people change unpredictably. Most people can’t stop waffling from one extreme to another. Some people try to extort more love; some reject all love. By loving, Francis often produced confusion for his beloved and for himself. Many people remember painful rejections which broke their hearts. So they defend themselves against real love. Real love, like a mother’s for her child, is too much for most people. We usually confine our intense love to home and family. Even there, with the people we love most, we find it difficult to love. Mothers and babies love each other best. But this wonderful super love ends. Often, children think that growing up means rejecting mother’s love. Remember the taunts of your youth: “That’s for babies. You’re tied to your mother’s apron strings.” These clichés express the usual struggle to become an adult. Francis saw mothers and babies doing what Jesus did for His beloved. Francis realized that Jesus sets the standard for real love.

How could Francis live up to that standard? How could he implement Christ’s love? How could he apply it in daily life, as Jesus did? This problem confused him, distracted him from his many pressing duties. Painfully, his confusion disrupted his prayer, and dispersed his efforts to extinguish self-love. Today many of us imagine that we must love ourselves before we can love others. We insist that self-love is the best of all loves. But Francis saw how crippling it is to love ourselves instead of God and neighbors. Francis admits that loving himself is false, destructive, and oppressive, both to himself and to others. By freeing himself from self-love, he emerges from darkness into light. In fact, he discovers his real self in God. Then he loves his reality as God loves him. Then he marveles how perfectly love unites people. He tells us the secret to that marvelous fit: “love nothing at all except God, and all souls for God”.

Francis assures us that if we love as Jesus taught us to love, we will heal wounds, unite our own fragmented hearts, and unify with our neighbors. This society will grow into Christ’s eternal kingdom of love. That is a fine description of the devout life. Devotion increases until we gain our share of divine love. Francis gives hundreds of examples of what he means by “devout”. Up until now, we have taken the meaning of “devout” for granted. But we must admit that we seldom use that word these days. To sharpen our understanding of its meaning, remember how Francis behaves. He is a fine example of devout life. How did he become so devout?

**Growing Up, Becoming Devout**

His parents loved him remarkably well. His home was full of affection, which fostered his happy disposition. God made him extra friendly, and his parents and caretakers nourished his good nature. Under his parents exceptional care, he developed devotion early in life. Parental love and care enabled Francis to become “exceedingly fascinating”.[[12]](#endnote-12) Perhaps “fascinating” is the most appropriate word to describe Francis. His natural loving personality, bolstered by affectionate parents, attracted everyone. This led his good friend, St. Jane de Chantal to remark: “The manner and speech of this blessed one were full of majesty and dignity, yet always the most humble, the most gentle, the most simple, that I have ever met.”[[13]](#endnote-13) She describes him as the personification of lovable devotion.

Francis expands his description of devotion: it is: not “fantastic, meddlesome, melancholy, vexatious, gloomy …, but … mild, gentle, agreeable, peaceful … in a word, … wholly sincere piety, which first loves God, and then men.”[[14]](#endnote-14) God created a devout heart in Francis. Then his parents fostered devotion. Finally it flowered into fascinating maturity. It is true that southern France is more likely to support sunny dispositions than northern France. But Italian spirituality “gave zest to this natural inclination to put the beautiful, touching, captivating Christian virtue into the spotlight. It taught our saint how the devout soul may be inwardly mortified, to the highest degree, without allowing this deep-rooted austerity to appear outwardly. He himself teaches this masterfully in his *Devout Life*, and his spiritual direction letters. He thus knew how to ‘humanize’ virtue… to make it beloved by the world, and to place it within reach of all.”[[15]](#endnote-15)

Jesuit education at Clermont, Paris, and Padua, nourished Francis’ devotion by emphasizing Christian humanism, with its full richness, highly polished, and profoundly appreciated by everyone he met. Here in America, we can hardly imagine this education, and how powerfully it influenced almost all of society in those days. Perhaps we can stretch our minds to envision liberal education, even though we see only practical education around us. More likely, we can approach Francis through his love for soaring mountains, since we live in spectacular scenery. His appreciation of lush valleys, leading to towering peaks, fed his longing for God’s infinite beauty.

We can also appreciate St. Francis de Sales through peaceful, gentle, and loving St. Francis of Assisi. They shared their love for nature, revealing God’s Love for creatures in their beauty. The difference is that our St. Francis is much better educated, more tolerant of middle-class prosperity, and so perfect at hiding his fasting that we don’t notice it. During the four centuries between them, society changed significantly. In the 1600’s, extreme poverty would not help reform society. The burning issue of the day was correcting spiritual corruption. The poor man from Assisi wore rags to correct the problem of his day. Our Francis wore noble garments. But each was equally poor in spirit. Each was equally hard on his body. Both were so devout that we would find both irresistible. Both are so attractive that they fascinate us.

Francis de Sales distinguished himself by exquisite balance. He shunned extremes. He was optimistic, but never presumptuous. He was careful, but never preoccupied. He calibrated his love and fear of God so exactly he welcomed Jesus into his heart. From that shining center, a loving awe of the Almighty shone forth from him. Everything Francis did for his loving Father started and ended in love, because God started this personal loving interaction. His act of creating us reveals His Love. He loves us into existence. Then He loves our wounded existence by mercifully forgiving all our sins. God’s infinite mercy inspired Francis to establish one of his most famous balances. He deemphasized man’s degeneration, and reemphasized his regeneration in Christ. Jesus cures our sinful alienation by sheading His life-blood to save us from sin, and reestablish our divine live. Francis contemplated this blockbuster truth until he believed it with all his heart. Then he was adequately heartened to approach Love Himself. Francis first accepted this infinite gift of God’s self-donation. Then he gave thanks for it. Finally, he spread the word that Jesus wants to save us, and awaits our acceptance. Regeneration in Christ is so true, good, and beautiful, that Francis beamed his optimism to everyone.

Jesus died for love of us to prove that love is the central fact of our existence. Christ showered infinite love upon us, and invites us to love Him. So Francis responded: “It is as wonderful as it is true that when our will follows its attraction, and consents to the divine impulse, we follow [God’s love] as freely as we resist it [when we sin]. …consenting to grace depends much more on grace than on our decision. …resistance to grace depends wholly on our decision. God’s hand is so loving, as He handles our heart, so adroit, that He gives us His strength without taking away our liberty”.[[16]](#endnote-16)

This statement is so beautiful in its original French words that translations can’t match it. But even the English words convey that God’s love attracts us, and never commands. God woos us more gently than a human lover courts his beloved. Naturally, our responding love falls infinitely short of God’s initiating love for us. When we decide to respond in our weak way, God loves us for trying. Our weak efforts enable Him to unite ever more closely with us, because we did agree to receive His love. He fascinates us so tenderly that we forever long for Him. Even our stumbling response pleases Him. He never forces us. He never reveals His lovable self so clearly that we can’t resist. By many decisions to accept His gift of love, we build our freedom until we are strong enough to give ourselves entirely. Then we soar away into God. After we confirm our will and determination to love Him, God can attract us into an ecstasy, some of which can rapture us out of this world. But, as Francis often said, these extraordinary ecstasies are rewards for long faithful service. They are not the stuff of everyday life. Instead of ecstasies, Francis emphasizes daily duties. He shows us how to trudge onward, facing more of the same, day after day, as our common life unfolds.

Francis affirms that the important element, what really counts, is our decision to accept God’s love, give thanks for it, and spread it around to our neighbors. As we decide, we grow. In fact, we become what we decide. Francis helps us to decide to love, and thus become lovers. God starts it all. He loves us first. His divine impulse tickles us, entices us, urges us, but never compels us. Our intellectual act enables us to understand, and our will act enables us to choose. These are our basic acts in God’s image and likeness. Because He loves our knowledge and our freedom, God wants us to use both, totally on our own. His love prevents Him from interfering with our understanding and willing. Instead of overwhelming us, he invites us. If we freely decide, then we let God lead us further into Himself, into Love. All along this loving way, God respects our freedom. Our liberty is His gift. We accept His love-gift if we use our freedom. That’s Francis’ meaning in “God’s loving hand adroitly handles our heart”. When He awaits our free choice, He shows His infinite strength.

Francis used his liberty to gesture toward God, lifting his soul up time after time to love God. Since he threw these loving messages out toward God, he called them ejaculations. This word migrates into English from the Latin words *ex* = out of, and *jacere* = to throw, hurl, cast. If we cast our hearts out of ourselves, up toward God, we satisfy our spiritual needs, and simultaneously grow into God’s own loving activity. These ejaculations also delight Francis because they express his personal action as he unites with God’s greats Personal Act: Love. Love enlivened Francis so much that he was the Energizer Bunny of his day. He was so busy that he said: “I write only by chance, and in emergency”.[[17]](#endnote-17) His good example of steadfast service inspired people to imitate him. So they urged him to write instructions they could follow. They wanted to be as actively happy as he was. Clearly, he “lived his books before composing them”.[[18]](#endnote-18)

He lived these books by opening his heart to receive Christ’s love, thanking Jesus for this grace, and sharing this divine love with all the people he met. They requested written instructions that they could follow to become as joyful as he was. He lived so active a life that people could not keep up with him. But they could take his book home, read it, ponder it, and learn to let divine love energize their lives. Francis was acutely active by accepting Pure Activity, alias God. Accepting God, yielding to His Being, welcomes His Being into us, making us more like Him, more active. God’s activity is perfectly unified into the Everlasting One. Our activity is scattered imperfectly, splayed all over the place. Just as Francis grew increasingly integrated by acting more like God, we can unify with God’s act by following Francis’ instructions.

**Summary**

This little introduction traces Francis as he expresses his fascinating love for people. No wonder that he attracted everyone. The more he opened his heart to Love Himself, the more loving Francis became. The more loving he became, the more attractive he was. This feed-back loop spirals up toward God. Building upon his naturally sweet disposition, he became increasingly attractive. His mercy, coming directly from God’s unending care, made Francis the most merciful man of his time. God’s infinite activity inspired Francis to be supremely active. He was so busy helping people that he didn’t want to waste time writing. But his friends insisted, so eventually he produced 27 volumes of inspiring writing. Out of this vast output, the most attractive and useful for us are:  *Introduction to the Devout Life, The Treatise on the Love of God, and True Spiritual Conferences*. His letters are also full of wit and wisdom, expressed in the finest style of his time. Though we can’t review all of his wonderful work, we can delve into *Devout Life*.

**The Introduction to the Devout Life**

**Orientation**

Francis wrote for busy people who are working their way through life. He shows them that exterior work should not distract them from interior devotion. First we will review quotes from Francis. Then I will restate his message in modern terms, with familiar examples. Hopefully, these comments help us follow Frances’ insights and recommendations. He emphasizes that our decisions build devotion in the moral dynamic of life. Since we seldom pay attention to our moral dimension, his examples help us focus on our invisible decisions. Our excuse may have been that we are busy support ourselves and family by working long and hard at a job. Whatever that job may be, we can become devout by doing it. The prime reason for living devoutly is that God’s love touches all of us, working or not. Francis illustrates his message with examples that illuminate ways to love our work, and to delight in doing it devoutly. Love of God inspires devotion, and carries it through difficulties, to fill us with joy. Of course, the joy of doing a job comes from God, not from the job. In fact, God provides the love, the job, and the people to serve. We show our appreciation by serving lovingly.

**The Book Itself**

Francis starts with a charming story about a florist. She arranged simple, but exquisite, bouquets. She had only a few types of flowers with which to work. But she arranged these few flowers so well that each bouquet was strikingly unique. These bouquets were so delightful that the painter Pausias strove to represent them on canvas. He thought he could exhaust their diversity with a dozen paintings. After many attempts, he quit trying to capture her creativity. “He could not vary his paintings in as many ways as Glycera varied her bouquets.”[[19]](#endnote-19)

This description touches our heart because it highlights Glycera’s inexhaustible creativity. Then Francis makes his profound point. “In like manner, the Holy Spirit disposes, and orders in many different ways, the devout instructions He gives us by the tongues and pens of his servants. Although the doctrine is always the same, statements of it differ greatly, according to the various ways in which they composed their books.”[[20]](#endnote-20) Francis leads us to follow the creative dynamic from florist to Holy Spirit. First Francis captures our attention with a simple story. When we understand it, he relates it to an interaction we are striving to understand. We struggle because the Holy Spirit works in us so gently and invisibly. Francis traces this activity, by relating it to the very similar arranging of the same basic flowers in different ways. Pointing out this similarity helps clarify the mysterious work of the Spirit. Encouraged by this lovely example, we look forward to many more clarifications.

First, we consider the style that Francis uses to expresses his clarifications. The few we have considered are not written in our style. We are accustomed to curt, practical, statements. They are effective to buy and sell products. But Francis uses a courtly style that stretches us out of our normal speech pattern. But when we relax into his endearing words, we sense his love for us. He uses more words that we do, but he says the same thing Christ says. So his love radiates from the words we read. If we ease into his love, we trust him to lead us into deeper devotion, to closer love for God.

Then Francis connects his own composition to the florist and the Spirit. “The flowers I present to you, my reader, are the same [as all theologians offer]. The bouquet I make out of them differs from others, because I fashion it in a different order and way.”[[21]](#endnote-21) His different way connects working people with devotion by focusing on their needs. His different order fits their busy lives better than the lofty logical order of other writers. Before Francis, spiritual directors composed for contemplative religious. Monks and nuns devoted themselves almost totally to prayer and meditation. Their short work to earn their meagre meals left them the majority of the day to pray. Francis accepts the necessity imposed on most people of working most of the day. So he reduces prayer time to ordinary working people’s leftover time after work.

Francis encourages us to make the most of our few opportunities. Most of us imagine that devout life is for professed religious, and only them. The pressure of making a living seems to bar us from devout life. Francis realized how false this image is. It is true that devout living is unusual, like springs of fresh water that gush up in the salt sea, or like fireflies flying through the flames without burning their wings. Such exceptions do occur. So “a strong soul can live in the world without being infected by its moods, find sweet springs of piety amid its salty waves, and fly through the flames of earthly lusts without burning the wings of its holy desires for a devout life. True, this is a difficult task, and therefore I wish that many souls would strive to accomplish it with greater ardor than usual. Weak as I am, I shall try by this treatise to provide some assistance to those who, with a generous heart, undertake so worthy a project.”[[22]](#endnote-22)

His love of generous people moved Francis to write notes for St. Jane de Chantal, to guide her devotion, so that it could bloom and flower. She asked him to develop these notes into a full book, to spread the wealth of his good advice. These notes proved their value by helping her advance toward God, during her very active life. Francis never intended to write a book. But he did comply with St. Jane’s request to share the wealth in his notes. Several theologians also encouraged him to present his unique process of developing devotion. He did not have the time required to write this book. That’s why he calls it a collection of bits of good advice, stated in plain words. He was too busy to develop it in the flowery form that was popular. To save time, he writes instructions directly to “Philothea”. This name stands for everyone who loves God. In Greek *philo* = love; *theos* = God. When you see Philothea, see yourself, because of your love for God. Loving God is devotion. You are already started on your journey to God. You have begun to devote yourself.

**Outline of the Book’s Parts**

Francis identifies five parts of this book. He writes the first to help Philothea improve her simple, natural, desire for God into her solid resolution to love Him through all trials. She solidifies her resolution by doing her ordinary activities. After ridding herself of sins by confessing them in the sacrament of Reconciliation, Philothea commits herself to love God. She applies her determination to enthusiastically decide to love Him entirely. To confirm her conviction, she attends Mass and receives Our Lord in Communion. During this most intimate union, she donates herself entirely to her Savior, thereby completely accepting His love. This effort launches her devout life. Everyone can do this much.

Francis wrote the second part to help Philothea advance toward greater love, to unite more entirely with God. The two steps of this part are simple: frequent the sacraments of confession and communion, and pray more fervently. Francis devotes the third part to developing virtues, which empower Philothea to love God more and more. Here, in this third part, Francis offers advice that ordinary people rarely receive. He fills the fourth part with warning signals to identify enemies, their snares, their attacks, and how to overcome them, as we struggle toward God. After this great effort, Francis writes the fifth part to show Philothea how to rest, refresh herself, and recover her strength to advance further toward heaven.

From his own super-active service as bishop, Francis knows how difficult it is for us to pray our way through our pressing jobs. He realizes that we will have trouble accepting his advice in the third and fourth parts of his book. So he reminds his readers that farmers never work harder than during harvest, and are never happier. The labor itself refreshes them. Yes, this paradoxical reality puzzles us, but we experience it ourselves, if we are farmers. If not, then we see it in the farmers we observe. Moreover, we have similar experiences. We enjoy most our most difficult jobs. This experience is crystalized in the Peace Corps ad: “The hardest job you’ll ever love”. This example of harvest-labor highlights the love that relieves work of its heaviest burdens. If natural love lightens our burdens, how much more will supernatural love of God delight us in whatever suffering comes our way? This love makes every beloved burden precious. That reality is encapsulated in the child’s statement: “He ain’t heavy, he’s my brother”. We are delighted to carry beloved burdens.

To press home his message, Francis gives the example recorded by Pliny. I summarize his long story on page 37. Alexander the Great loved the lovely Campaspe. He wanted to carry a portrait of her when he embarked on his military campaigns. So he asked the great artist Apelles to paint her portrait. As he painted, Apelles gazed upon Campaspe for hours. Naturally, he fell in love with her. Alexander took pity on him. Instead of killing him, Alexander gave his beloved Campaspe to the artist Apelles in marriage. Pliny points out that this gift indicates Alexander’s virtue much more clearly than all his military victories put together. Alexander endured the loss of his beloved because he loved virtue.

Francis hastens to apply this story to his own love. Above all, he loves to foster Christ-life in his friends. Love is that way because love, by its nature, is dynamic, it forever expands. In his words, Francis strives to engrave “devotion on the minds of others… [so that his] own mind will be filled with a holy love for [expanding devotion]… Through God’s infinite goodness, I encourage myself that when I lead His beloved flock to the healthful waters of devotion, He will make my soul His spouse, and put in my ears the golden words of His holy love, and in my arms strength to practice them well. This is the essence of true devotion. I humbly beseech His Divine Majesty to grant this to me, and to all the children of His Church – the Church to which I forever submit my writings, my deeds, my words, my decisions, and my thoughts.”[[23]](#endnote-23)

In this rich passage, Francis exposes his good example of loving as God loves, by forever increasing. True devotion loves God with His own love. His love forever creates more love. When human love blends with divine love, each human becomes increasingly divine. So Francis strives to involve other people in this unending divine love dynamic. Naturally the truth about divine love leads us to its goodness. Francis strives to “engrave” devotion in our minds, so that as we think about it, we gradually yield to its truth and goodness. This is the gentle way that God woos us, enticing us to love Him ever-more. Francis merely helps God expand His love. The more Francis helps, the more deeply his devotion penetrates his soul. Love expands to, and through, everyone who accepts God’s initiative. Hence, Francis comes to love even his efforts to help us love. This is the natural result of God’s infinite goodness. If we open our heart even a crack to let it in, God’s goodness gushes in to us. Then we enjoy God’s goodness so much that we catch fire. Fire represents our simultaneous satisfaction and desire to love more. This dynamic expansion is healthy growth, nourished by true devotion.

This healthy growth never stops. Instead, growing love ever-more-closely unites God with the soul, the Spouse with the bride. God creates us. Therefore all souls are thereby feminine to God. Besides initiating us, God enables us to continue our pursuit of happiness. Moreover, God pursues all souls, courting each of us endlessly. This constant outpouring of God’s overflowing love so intrigues Francis that he contemplates this growth process. As he meditates, he calls the words God uses to express His holy love “golden”. One of the most “golden” of God’s words acts to strengthen Francis to grow into increasing love forevermore. Responding to God’s original love by returning love is “the essence of true devotion”. Francis humbly requests that God grant him, and all the Church, increasing devotion. Then Francis lays his writings, deeds, preachings, decisions, and thoughts at God’s feet. This is a poetic way to say that he submits his every act to God’s vicars (stand-ins) who lead the Church. This simple sketch of the book’s basic parts illustrates the remarkable set of spiritual topics, and the excellent example that Francis gives us, enveloped in the encouragement that he showers upon us.

**Chapter One**

His introductory chapter vividly describes devotion. Loving God starts by acknowledging the gap between us. Then we accept responsibility for imposing that gap by our sins and faults. Each of our faults keeps us from God. Our willful faults are our decisions to reject God by preferring ourselves to Him. Francis says it this way: “Since little faults, committed in the beginning of a project, grow infinitely greater in its course, and finally are almost irreparable”[[24]](#endnote-24), you must renounce them, and devote yourself entirely. Entire devotion requires us to distinguish true from false devotion. To make this distinction, Francis recalls individual differences. Each person loves God in a unique way. Francis provides a gentle example by referring to a painter who was well known back then in the 1600’s.

“In his pictures, Arelius painted all faces in the likenesses of the women he loved. So too everyone paints devotion according to his own passions and fancies. A man given to fasting believes he is very devout if he fasts, although his heart may be filled with hatred. Much concerned with sobriety, he doesn’t dare to wet his tongue with wine, or even water. But he won’t hesitate to drink deep of his neighbor’s blood, by detraction and calumny. Another man believes he is devout because he daily recites a vast number of prayers, but after saying them, he utters the most disagreeable, arrogant, and harmful words at home, and among his neighbors. Another gladly takes a coin out of his pocket, and gives it to the poor, but he cannot extract kindness from his heart, and forgive his enemies. Another forgives his enemies, but never pays his creditors, unless compelled to do so by force of law. All these men are usually considered to be devout, but they are by no means such. Saul’s servants searched for David in his house. But Michol had put a statue on his bed, covered it with David’s cloak, and thus led them to think that it was David himself, lying there, sick and sleeping. Likewise, many persons clothe themselves with some outward actions connected to holy devotion, and many people believe that they are truly devout and spiritual. But actually they are just copies and phantoms of devotion.”[[25]](#endnote-25)

Here Francis shows us profound spiritual truth by simple images. The appearance of devotion is merely a shadow. True devotion is consistent light, illuminating and warming everything it touches. We see only fragments, like the statue in the bed, and the superficial covering of David’s cloak. This minimum effort exhausts us so entirely that we assume that David is in his bed. A little extra effort would prevent this mistake. Similarly, we too often mistake cheap externals for valuable realities. Specifically, we too often declare that surface appearances are profound devotion. Francis helps us look past the frame into the picture. Like advertisements, sensations mislead us. To avoid mistakes, look deeper into the activity. When a person “shines us on” he can fool us. With added effort to peek beneath the shine, we can avoid being fooled. When we seek devotion, we look for consistent love of our neighbor. An occasional donation may hide hatred inside. Repeated prayers may mask unkindness. Instead, real devotion is consistently kind. By it, we reject hatred and accept love.

Deciding to love is “genuine, living, devotion”. Devotion “presupposes love of God. So it is simply true love of God. Yet it is not always love as such. When divine love adorns the soul, it is clothed in grace. This grace makes us pleasing to His Divine Majesty. When divine love strengthens us to do good, the soul is full of charity. When it reaches high perfection it not only makes us do good, but do it carefully, frequently, and promptly. Then it is devotion. Ostriches never fly. Hens fly in a clumsy way, near the ground, and only now and then. But eagles, doves, and swallows fly high, swiftly, and frequently. Similarly, sinners never fly up towards God. They are earthbound. Good people, without devotion, fly toward God infrequently, slowly, and awkwardly. Devout souls ascend to Him more frequently, promptly, and skillfully. So devotion is simply spiritual agility and vivacity. It is charity working in us, enabling us to work quickly and lovingly. As charity enables us to do all God’s commandments generally without exception, so devotion enables us to do them quickly and diligently. Hence a man who does not keep all God’s commandments cannot be either good or devout.”[[26]](#endnote-26)

Francis shows us that love of God energizes every creature in its own unique way. God’s merciful love is the basis for our being. God loving us into existence is out existence. When we freely decide to love God in return for His creative love, we begin to bloom. We accept God’s initial love, and respond with our weak imitation-love. This is what it means to be in God’s image and likeness. We are family. So if we do the family thing, i.e. love, we soar up into God. Birds soar each in its own way. Francis reminds us that if we fail to love God’s love for us, we ground ourselves. We become earthbound, like ostriches. The more we respond to God’s love, the more we fly. At first we don’t get far off the ground, like chickens. If we are good, we fly feebly toward God like hens. But if we are devout, we elevate like eagles. When we love God, we seek to please Him. Because He loves us, He delights in us when we love Him in return. When we love Him, we please Him. If, instead of loving Him, we waste our love on superficial things, we disappoint Him. Too often, we collect trifles, instead of loving God. He is our only worthwhile value. Francis encourages us to become devout by giving us many examples that kindle our love into ever-greater ardor, or eagerness to love Him and our neighbors.

In these many examples, Francis presupposes that we understand freedom. Today, we are so restricted that we forget what freedom means. On every side, tyrants command us. Francis recommends that we recover our freedom, and strengthen it, when we love God. We can decide to do whatever we like. Francis urges us to decide to love the Person Who loves us most. If we decide to love God, we unite with Him. Our increasing identity with Him intensifies when we love, because love intensely unites lovers. God is perfect, so He does not change. But we change to become increasingly one with Him. God is Freedom. Therefore, if we love God more, we become more free by uniting with Freedom.

Have you heard of that increased freedom? Probably not. Most of today’s freedom-talk is about feeling free. But altogether too many people strive to enslave you. They want you to be their consumer slave. They want you to buy what they sell. They want you to shop until you drop. They want you to obey their commands, disguised as ads. God intends the opposite process. He wants you to be as He is: free to decide what is best. His divine Freedom is available, if you progress toward Him by freely loving Him. Many people complain that God is silent these days. They mean that He does not shout commands. Of course not! He whispers love poems instead. To hear Him, Francis recommends that we still our anxiety, quit chasing vanities, and listen to His whispered invitations to love.

Francis assumes that we already know many things which were common knowledge then. It’s sad to say, but we may not know them at all. For example, he affirms that our identification with God grows with every decision we make to love Him. That may seem odd to us, because today many people mistake warm feelings for love. But feelings are notoriously fickle, unstable, and unreliable. That’s why love seems to flee away from them, to come and go willy-nilly. This mistaken notion of love leaves many people in the lurch, abandoned by fleeting feelings. A few people notice how unreliable feelings are, and decide to love. Their love endures and expands, nourishes, and invigorates everyone nearby. From these few people, we learn that feelings don’t matter. Decisions do. The more we decide to love God, the more we and He unite. He is perfect Freedom. So our identity with Him increases until our freedom blooms. Then we can fly like eagles.

When we decide to love, we start advancing into devotion. The more devoted we are to God, the more we want to please Him. So the more eager we are to obey Him. Francis describes our first staggering steps into devotion. “A man recently recovered from illness walks only as far as he must, and then slowly, with difficulty. So also a sinner recently healed of his iniquity walks as far as God commands him, but slowly, with difficulty, until he attains devotion. Then, like a man in good health, he not only walks, but runs, and leaps forward ‘on the way to God’s commandments’, Ps 118:32. Furthermore, he runs in the paths of His heavenly counsels and inspirations. …Charity and devotion differ no more from one another than flame differs from fire. Charity is spiritual fire. When it bursts into flames, it is called devotion. Hence, devotion adds nothing to the fire of charity except the flame that makes charity prompt, active, and diligent, not only to observe God’s commandments, but also to fulfill His heavenly counsels and inspirations.”[[27]](#endnote-27)

Francis gives this simple analogy of the recovering man walking so that we can immediately understand it. We recognize that we ourselves are wounded. We want to recover, but we are weak. This analogy reminds us to progress from staggering walk to healthy walk. Then we are like the ostrich. But we want to fly, at first like a hen, then like an eagle, because we want to rise rapidly toward God. First, we rely upon the Great Physician, Jesus, to heal our wounds. Then we progress from stumbling to walking, to running, even to flying. Francis then shifts our analogy from the good example of healing to the more exciting example of fire. These metaphors are necessary because our common words are for common things. When we want to speak of uncommon things, we must stretch common words into analogies. There we relate common things to uncommon things rather clearly. Analogies relate things that are different, but similar. Biological wounds are not spiritual wounds, but the both of them heal gradually. Physical walking is not spiritual advance, but they both proceed gradually. Their similarities enable us to apply common knowledge to uncommon learning. Certainly, we eagerly desire to flare up with spiritual fire. Perhaps we sputter for a while, but if we keep deciding to accept God’s love, then we burst into flames. This blazing love is fully flaming devotion. Perhaps we can profit from a description of how fine and fitting devotion is. So Francis offers an inspiring account of this fiery love.

**The Propriety and Excellence of Devotion**

Francis helps us realize how naturally devotion fits us. We need to learn this fit because most people ignore devotion. Some noisy people even ridicule it, treating devout people with scorn. Most folks insist that devotion is impossible, a pipe dream for unrealistic souls. In America, we commonly believe that devotion is for losers. We say that, devout persons lack the gumption to compete, and the guts to dominate. Francis reminds us that many people, for a long time, have rejected devotion. Francis shows that some people refuse to exert the required effort to become devout. At the other extreme, some people exert too much effort. An example of too little effort was the response to Israelite scouts who visited the Promised Land of Canan. They reported that gigantic monsters lived there, and ate men like locusts, Num 13:33. This exaggeration terrified so many Israelites that they refused to invade Canan. Similar exaggerations can frighten us away from devotion. Who has not heard that devoted people are discontent, gloomy, and sullen, suffering from “depression and unbearable moods”.[[28]](#endnote-28) As Francis insists, saints are instead sweet, happy, and loveable. He certainly was. Only a happy person can “pray, fast, endure injuries, care for the sick, give alms to the poor, keep vigils, restrain anger, suppress passions, forsake sensual pleasures, and serve in spite of pain and exhaustion.” [[29]](#endnote-29)

Within memory, St. John Paul II is an excellent example of loving by suffering. He inspired us by lovingly enduring persecution, murder attempts, and failing health. Similarly, St. Padre Pio laughed at the devil who beat him. Each of these saints lived so profoundly in love with God that their suffering soared up into union with our crucified Christ. His agony on the cross expresses love most emphatically. “Greater love no one has than to die for his beloved”, Jn 15:13. When we take seriously the fact that God loved us unto death, everything fits into perspective. Then we graciously receive God’s infinite love, give thanks, and generously share His love with His beloved people. The light of Christ’s love transforms threats into opportunities. Instead of fearing pain, saints transform pain into service. Francis’ similar suffering convinced him that devotion is supremely satisfying. Even mild pain scares people away from service. But devotion overcomes pain, transforms it into obvious joy, surpassing every counterproductive attempt to capture joy.

Francis expresses this truth more poetically. “Look at the bees among the thyme flowers. They find there a very bitter juice, but suck it out, and transform it into honey… It is true that devout souls encounter great bitterness in their renunciations, but by performing them, they change them into something most sweet and delicious. Because the martyrs were devout men and women, fire, flame, wheel, and sword seemed to be flowers and perfume to them. If devotion can sweeten the most cruel torments, and even death itself, what must it do for virtuous actions?”[[30]](#endnote-30)

Tasting thyme juice is not popular, so we probably do not know its bitterness. Instead, we believe Francis. Skeptics can Google up the facts. Having tried honey, we know quite well how sweet it is. Like a bee, we can transform bitter loses into sweet service of God. Jesus did precisely this when He carried his cross to Calvary. We can follow Him with devout love that makes all suffering sweet. All martyrs imitate St. Stephen, Ac 7:58, to die devoted to Christ. This super-abundant love of Jesus transforms their pain into the joy of going to God. Recall that Christ starts our growth in love by giving love to us. Francis shows us that devotion is accepting and returning this gift of love. If this dynamic can transform torture and death into joy, what can it do for virtuous acts? These acts are already delicious of their very nature. They are so intimately connected to divine love that they improve everything they touch. Consider the example of helping someone out of a wrecked car. When we were innocent children, our hearts went directly out to the suffering person. The more devout we are, the more we naturally strive to help. If we reject devotion, we can harden our heart, even enough to ignore the person in the wreck. Instead, we want to know the joy of love flowing to another person. In addition to this joy directly from our virtuous act, we realize that our virtue increases. This increase in virtue doubles our delight.

Francis uses the following homely example to help us understand. “Sugar sweetens green fruit, and even corrects whatever is crude and unwholesome in ripe fruit. Now devotion is true spiritual sugar, for it removes bitterness from mortification, and takes away anything harmful from our consolations. Devotion takes away discontent from the poor. From the rich, it removes worry. From the oppressed, it banishes grief. From the exalted, it eliminates pride. From the solitary, it dissolves sorrow. From people stressed in society, it discards distraction. Therefore, it is fire in winter, and dew in summer. It uses prosperity and endures want [to profit from both extremes]. Both honor and contempt are useful for us by devotion, which accepts pleasure and pain with a constant heart, full of sweetness.”[[31]](#endnote-31)

These homely examples need no clarification. But it may help us to reflect on some seldom-used words like “mortification” and “consolation”. Folks in our busy world don’t talk about mortification. It means “killing”. What would we kill? Sin, above all. But our sinful tendencies keep cropping up to drag us down. If our sinful tendency is eating too much, we mortify our gluttonous inclination by fasting. We refrain from food to gain control of our appetite. This mortification is necessary if we want to control ourselves. We live better lives if we mortify those unruly inclinations which disturb our peace. Francis mortified himself severely. When he killed his rebellious impulses, he became a delightful person, fascinating because he controlled himself. Such an integrated person is remarkably rare, and exceptionally attractive.

Consolation is also rare these days. But we need it more and more because much of our life is miserable. Our days are full of irritations that disturb, frazzle, and wear us out. We need someone to calm, reassure, and reorient us to do our jobs. These jobs can be boring obligations which exhaust us. But they can console us if we see that completing them advances us toward God. The loving context of uniting with Love Himself is missing. This union is not obvious, so we turn to a simple example. Mothers know how to console their children (even if their children are 50 years old). Mothers know best because they love best. Their sterling example teaches us that consolation is love healing daily wounds, be they physical, psychological, or spiritual. Francis would probably say that consolation cools our common fever. Throughout our lives, we need constant consolation.

Our need is so great that we often try too hard for consolation, and destroy it by lusting for it. That’s why it is very popular today to play the victim, to milk consolation from good-hearted people. This is the “harmful” misuse of consolation that Francis mentions. It misuses the consolation that it extorts from merciful people because the “victim” commands their care. In reality, consolation is a gift used up in the giving and receiving. Like a light breeze, it caresses and sooths us. But if we try to stock-pile this breeze, it disappears. This misuse is counterproductive. It backfires because we waste the consolation that kind people donate. People realize this, and cease to reward us for our misuse. Thus we destroy the good effects of consolation in two ways. We waste what we get, and cut off the supply from kind-hearted people. Then we miss the consolation we need so much that we are increasingly voracious for it.

Francis offers us a way out of this dead end. “Consider Jacob’s ladder, Gen 28:12, for it is a true picture of the devout life. The two sides of the ladder represent: prayer, which calls down God’s love, and sacraments, which confer it. The rungs are the various degrees of charity by which we advance from virtue to virtue, either descending, by deeds of help and support for our neighbor, or ascending, by contemplation, to a living union with God. I ask you to regard attentively those who are on this ladder. They are either men with angelic hearts, or angels in human bodies. They are not young, though they seem to be so, because they are full of vigor and spiritual agility. They have wings to soar aloft to God in holy prayer, and they also have feet to walk among men in a holy and lovable way of life. Their faces are beautiful and joyous because they accept all things meekly and mildly. Their legs, arms, and heads are uncovered because in their thoughts, affections, and deeds they have no purpose or motive but to please God. The rest of their body is clothed, but only by a decent light robe, because they use the world and worldly things, but do so in a most pure and proper way, taking from them only what is necessary for their condition. Such are devout persons.”[[32]](#endnote-32)

Rapidly sketched as this message is, it still conveys to us a striking example of the ladder Jacob saw in his guiding vision. Angels ascending and descending to and from God vividly picture God’s love for us. He sends His spiritual messengers to teach us how to act. If we accept these messages, we can accept God’s gift of love, and advance up the ladder He provides to unite with Him. If we choose to do what the angels describe, then we do what God created us to do. Then our image and likeness of God radiates all around us. This radiation delights us, and inspires everyone who sees us cooperate with the descending angels. The ascending angels carry our good deeds to God’s throne to delight him. The angel-ladder sheds God’s glory on earth, and carries man’s glory to God. These glories merge into one, amplified by all God’s creatures who cooperate with the Source and Destiny of all Glory.

Francis adds to this picture the details that support Jacob’s ladder. Each rail represents increasing union by two infallible supports for angels and men interacting on the way to God. Prayer extends infinitely, earth to heaven, to unite men, angels, and God. Perhaps we can profit from pausing to review prayer. As children, our prayer is mostly repeated words, often dissolving in distractions. Some childish prayers are intense, and prepare for maturity. We mature into prayer when we leap into love. As we perfect our prayer, it becomes more loving, more yearning for God, more like God Who is Love. As we come closer to Love Himself, we become more loving. Everything merges into Love. Prayer becomes more obviously an act of loving in the way that Love loves. No wonder that Francis calls it a main support of the angel-ladder.

Sacrifice is the other support. Everyone who loves God wants to give Him gifts. The sacrifices of Cain and Abel, Gen 4:3-5, illustrate our attempt to ascend from earth to heaven. From them we see a long history of failed sacrifices. Paul vividly describes this failure in many of his epistles. But Jesus perfects sacrifice. He actually satisfies for sin. How? Christ was God Himself. So His infinite goodness perfectly paid the infinite debt of sin. When we worthily participate in the Mass, we join His infinite sacrifice. We attend His Last Supper and His Perfect Sacrifice on Calvary. Jesus opens His sacrifice to us daily by the Eucharistic sacrament. That’s why it is our main support across the infinite gap between us and God. Francis reminds us that sacraments bridge this gap. They allow us to attain God. Sacraments across infinity deliver God’s gifts to us, and carry Christ’s sacrificial gifts to God. No wonder that Francis identifies prayer and sacraments as the ladder’s uplifting rails.

Then he considers the connecting rungs which are steps to climb this ladder. Like Plato fifteen centuries earlier, Francis relates each ascending rung to a higher degree of virtue. Thus the ladder visually represents our invisible moral condition. Physical efforts to ascend a rung by stepping up another level represent moral efforts to step up to greater love. We must exert ourselves somewhat to ascend up each moral level of love. The physical effort to climb a visual ladder corresponds to the moral effort to ascend the Ladder of Love. Francis offers examples of specifically visible deeds of help and support for our neighbors. Each of us can fill in personal details. These specifics help us recall our own acts of charity, which advance us up the ladder of love. By rooting our personal decisions in these pictures, we penetrate the fog to find the facts of life expressed in our moral choices to serve.

In another meaningful dimension, Francis tells us that the beings ascending and descending Jacob’s ladder can be either angels or men. Though they are not children, they are as nimble as kids. Their superior vigor and agility suggest wings to fly like eagles toward God. After all, the distance from earth to heaven is infinite. Human step by step is definitely too slow to cross infinity. Just as Scripture soars all the way to God, so Scripture’s images must ascend past the limits of our imagination. Francis dwells lovingly upon these travelers, for they provide visible images standing for invisible prayers and blessings. We can join this imaginary process to picture their beautiful and joyous faces. They must be lovely and delighted because they give themselves totally to God, to do His will. Their beauty and joy flow from obeying Him entirely. This 100% devotion makes them meek and mild. They are perfectly fulfilled in God’s infinite love, so they do not strain toward Him. Even their clothing inspires Francis to extol their poverty. They use material things for one purpose, and one purpose only: to glorify God. They do their job, which is necessary for their “condition” as God’s messengers. Francis ends his rhapsody of meditation on this angel-ladder with the clinching lesson: “such are devout persons”.

Because Francis is deliriously delighted, he describes his joy more fully. “Believe me, my dear Philothea, devotion is the delight of delights, and queen of the virtues, because it is the perfection of charity. If charity is milk, devotion is its cream. If charity is a plant, devotion is its blossom. If charity is a precious stone, devotion is its luster. If charity is a rich ointment, devotion is its odor, yes the odor of sweetness which comforts men and rejoices angels.”[[33]](#endnote-33)

With these few words, Francis opens his heart to us. Obviously, he loves devotion above everything else. There is nothing he could do that is more satisfying. Why? The main reason is that devotion means divine love. Because divine love is more than we can understand, can’t finish our comprehension of it. Instead, we forever gaze in fascination at God’s Love, learning more each moment. So we love to look at it again and again. Divine love banishes boredom. The everlasting wonder of love is that even though it exceeds our comprehension, we love to examine its excess. If we could finish understanding love, we would die of boredom. The fascination of love is precisely its infinitely excessive being. We know it never ends, and we delight in this infinity. Failing to comprehend Love reassures us that God’s infinity is real. If we finally grasp the essence of some being, we are sure that it is limited. It is merely a creature.

Maybe we can profit from the more extensive investigation of love that the Greeks innovated. The poverty of the English language is nowhere more apparent than in the single word we use for love. The Greeks identified eight different dimensions of love, and invented different words for each. They noticed that each kind of love is a type of unity. It begins by attracting us to something, follows by moving toward it, to unite with it, and then enjoy completing this union. Perhaps we never consider these steps specifically. But they ring true. In the back of our minds, we realize these steps unfold. Obviously, lots of things attract a baby. Then he moves toward them as best he can, unites by putting them in his mouth, and delights if they are tasty. So the first type of love is consuming attractive things. Greeks called this *eros*. It is the fundamental type of love, often identified with flamboyant desire (passion), wild approach, devouring union, and glowing joy, even if we belch. An example is consuming a Big Mac. *Eros* is essential for life. Without it, we would starve. But it is notoriously dangerous, misleading, and damaging. So we hope to gain control of *eros*, lest it gain control of us.

Perhaps you know people dominated by *eros*. Francis wanted to help them escape. He wanted them to overcome confinement in consumption. He organized a jail-break for ordinary people, out from *eros,* and up a step on the ladder of love. God’s love invigorated Francis to assist people to emerge from mere *eros*. In a positive sense, Francis employed *eros* to overcome *eros*. Emerging from its tyrany does not mean abandoning *eros* entirely. The importance of a balanced appetite for Big Macs reminds us that control is our objective, not extermination. Proper employment of *eros* is essential for our survival. But we definitely desire to advance to the next step on our way up the ladder of love, to its ultimate perfection. Somehow we know that we’re bound for glory in God.

In Greek terminology, the next step is *ludus*. Children love this type of love because it is play. Kids play almost continuously every waking moment. Even in Church, they tend to play. As we observe playing children, we recognize that their step up from *eros* to *ludus* requires more discernment, more consideration, more planning. Play requires a growing knowledge of creatures, and how to manipulate them. To live *ludus*, a child must select an objective, plan a process to attain it, guided by rules, that conclude by coordinating real events. We see this in observable facts. As children grow, they develop play from mere hopping up and down, into tag, then hide and seek, and, finally, a rule-governed game, like football. It’s even possible to play by steps which are entirely mental. In fact, imagining the sequence of steps is much faster, and more enjoyable than physical play. This is true because the imaginary version can be free of annoying defects. Moreover, an imaginary player can always win an imaginary contest. People develop *ludus* as they mature, but change its name to dancing or partying. Rather clearly, *ludus* does not require the passion to consume anything. So it is a unification in a dimension different from *eros*. However, some people fail to advance completely from consumption to play. They convert delight in playing into passionate consumption of victories. For them, *eros* corrupts *ludus*. So we see people consumed by competition. Children do not suffer from this bad habit. Play itself suffices for them, whoever wins. Increasingly with maturity, a love of cooperation emerges in games. The other players are significant in healthy *ludus*. Through this healthy development, *ludus* opens the child to significant, and progressive, personal interaction.

This interaction matures into *philia*, or friendship, the love of equals. Freely given, received, and reciprocated, *philia* is so satisfying that many people devote themselves to it exclusively. Probably, we have met people who excel in this type of love. Deep concern for the other friend produces intense observation to detect that friend’s needs. From this sharp investigation, the observing friend discovers exactly what will delight the beloved other friend. With some ability, skill, and practice, mutual *philia* is endlessly delightful. Francis excelled at this kind of love, and recommends it as a step upward toward ultimate satisfactory union. Francis learned *philia* from its greatest practitioner: Jesus.

The next step up, because it is more devotional, is *storge* or family-love. Mutual parent-child, and sibling-sibling love is often remarkably strong. The measure of family love is how much one will give for the other. Frequently, parents will gladly die for their children. Less frequently, siblings will die for each other. Obviously, most people choose to exercise some degree of *storge*. This love is therefore quite natural, perhaps unavoidable. So we expect it to prevail among members of the immediate family. Francis never mentions these Greek words, but always promotes these loves. He especially helps us to integrate them, so that our loves become balanced, mutually reinforcing each other as we move toward perfect love: our ultimate union with God.

A modern term, *erotas*, means intimate love, usually sexual, but always personal. Giving our self for our beloved characterizes this love. Thus a young man can relate to a young woman erotically, because he wants to consume her by taking pleasure from her. But he can relate to her with *erotas* if he wants to court her by giving himself to her entirely. At first, he may notice only his passionate fascination with his beloved. But she can teach him to rise a step above *philia*, on the way to married love, culminating in *storge*.

There is a tricky step that can go either up or down love’s ladder. *Philautia* is self-love. If it is positive, it helps us love our neighbor as we love ourselves, Mt 22:39; Mk 12:31; Lk 10:27. But if it is negative, then we decide to love ourselves exclusively. This type of union is confusing because we can love ourselves in order to give ourselves, or in order to take from others for ourselves. The distinguishing characteristic of positive *philautia* is that it includes other persons. This positive *philautia* looks past the beloved self to include other persons, precisely because they are lovable selves, like we are. Therefore positive *philautia* opens us to other persons. This step up love’s ladder invigorates out entire love for God. Secure in His love, we can love our neighbor with inclusive love. Perhaps we watched people turn from positive to negative *philautia*. The obvious example is the man who divorces his wife, abandons his children, and throws himself into a tizzy of consuming someone. This reversal from positive to negative self-love damages the man by corrupting a very good love. But he also destroys his family, harms his wife and children irrevocably, and imposes his fantasy upon the real person he claims to love. He usually insists that he is improving himself, stepping up in the world, freeing himself from stifling drudgery, and falling into real love. He proclaims that everyone will win this game. These lies crumble precisely because this corruption of *philautia* turns the person into himself. This inversion necessarily excludes others from his heart, even though he uses them to extort benefits from them. Francis shows us how to mortify negative *philautia*, and promote positive *philautia*. Because love ourselves properly is so tricky, Francis shows many ways to track it, and correct it.

Once corrected, *philautia* can enable expansion above and beyond self-love. Remarkably, all loves coordinate with each other, and unify into more perfect completion. The next step is most popular. Almost everyone strives to develop married love, called *pragma*. Hopefully, we experience many outstanding examples of this love. Unfortunately, these days the number of good examples has diminished. We can use either good or bad examples to understand the necessity of *pragma* to take the next upward step toward total self-giving to the other. Ideally, a person marries a best friend, and becoming increasingly one with that person. Mutual love grows into their intense desire to have children together. Love is intimately productive. The husband so admires his wife that he wants to expand her life into children. The wife returns this complement, and even endures agony to deliver children. Then the real challenge rises up. How can this growing family flourish amid difficulties that no textbook could predict. Fortunately, stunning examples of this type of love encourage us to advance. Francis describes *pragma* perfecting *storge*, which reinforces *pragma*, and opens us to our highest love.

This ultimate love is *agape*. The Greek word means unequal love, like a mother loves her child, or God loves us, or we love God. The beloved is always a person, but is not at the same level of being as the lover. The entirety of this love makes it total devotion. This is the goal that Francis strives to attain, and helps us to pursue. Jesus reveals that God loves us totally. This divine love is obviously between unequal beings: Creator and created. God is infinitely beyond us. His love for us is the ultimate satisfaction that we so eagerly desire. Christ teaches us how to respond to God’s agape. We must love God totally, above all things. This 100% love of God for us, and we for God, is the ultimate union for which we strive so strenuously. Francis gives his all to love divine Love. This is the perfect devotion that Francis inspires us to achieve. But too many people feel overwhelmed by this task of pursuing divine Love across the *agape* gap. But Francis knows from personal experience that Jesus saves, and many simple examples encourage everyone to keep striving.

**Devotion is Possible in Every Vocation and Profession**

In his usual endearing way, Francis starts with an inspiring example. “When he created things, God commanded plants to bring forth their fruits, each according to its kind, Gen 1:11. In like manner, he commands Christians, the living plants of his Church, Jn 15:5, to bring forth the fruits of devotion, each according to his position and vocation. Devotion must be exercised in different ways by the gentlemen, the worker, the servant, the prince, the widow, the young girl, and the married woman. Not only is this true, but the practice of devotion must also be matched to the strength, to the jobs, and to the duties of each individually… Devotion, when it is true, never spoils anything, but rather perfects all things. When it becomes inconsistent with the lawful vocation of anyone, it is certainly false.”[[34]](#endnote-34)

Francis gently reminds us of God’s creative care for plants and humans. We profit from this reminder to check our experience, and notice how true it is. Today, we seldom refer to our experience, so we may lose confidence in it. This is the enslaving technique so popular today. We escape these chains by relying on our personal interaction with what is happening. Then we recognize that people have different duties, therefore different responsibilities, and finally different rights. Francis advises us to match our devout acts, first, to our jobs, then to our spiritual strength. We are beginners, who must progress slowly, in proper order. Otherwise we wear ourselves out, instead of serving God. The more devoted we are, the more we share in God’s love. His love motivates us to strengthen ourselves so that we can aid others. When we practice devotion, we progress to higher spiritual strength. During this progress, whatever we do out of God’s love never spoils. This is a fine way to say that we do not spoil our jobs by too much, or too little effort.

Instead, Francis quotes Aristotle’s observation of the bee: “‘The bee extracts nectar from flowers without hurting them, leaving them as fresh as when it found them’. True devotion does better still. It not only does no injury to its job, but, on the contrary, adorns and beautifies it. All kinds of precious stones take on greater luster when dipped into honey, each according to its color. So every job becomes more agreeable when united with devotion. Care of one’s family is more peaceable, love of husband and wife more sincere, service of one’s prince more faithful, and every type of employment more pleasant and agreeable.”[[35]](#endnote-35) These examples touch our hearts, encouraging joyful acceptance of his teaching.

Next, he provides a long list of examples of saints, from housewife to king. He shows that they united with God precisely by doing their jobs. These saints were well known in 1609, but most of them are unknown to us today. It’s worth our while to expand our knowledge of saints, because their lives inspire us. The details of their struggles support our efforts to overcome our daily trials. Rather than investigate inspiring saints, we will examine guidance to devotion.

**Need of a Guide for Beginning Devotion, and Making Progress in It**

Francis begins with the Old Testament story of Tobias, trying to get to Rages even though he did not know the way. “When commanded to go to Rages, young Tobias answered: ‘I do not know the way’. His father replied: ‘Go then and find some man to lead you’, Tob 5:2-4. I say the same thing to you, Philothea. Do you seriously wish to travel the road to devotion? If so, look for a good man to guide and lead you. This is the most important of all words of advice. As the devout St. John of Avila says: ‘although you seek God’s will, you will never find it with such certainty as on the path of that humble obedience so highly praised and practiced by all devout writers’. St. Teresa of Avila [wanted to disobey her confessor by being more penitent, but] God said to her: ‘My daughter, you are on a good and safe road. Do you desire the penance that she does? I put higher value on your obedience’. Hence she loved this virtue so much that in addition to that owed to her superiors, she made a vow of unique obedience to [a spiritual director] and bound herself to follow his direction and example. By doing so, she received great consolations. Both before and after her, in order to become better subjects of God, many other devout souls have in like manner submitted their will to directors. In her *Dialogs*, St. Catherine of Sienna gives the highest praise to obedience. A devout princess, St. Elizabeth [of Hungary] submitted herself with full obedience to the Master Conrad. St. Louis, king of France, advised his son: ‘Go to confession frequently, and choose as your confessor an able and experienced man who can safely teach you the things that you must do’.”[[36]](#endnote-36)

Francis enlists Philothea’s commitment. If she seriously wants to become devout, then she must follow a man who is very devout. He can guide her. He can prevent lots of false starts, wasted steps, and wandering off the true path. This is the goal to achieve by “finding an excellent man”, and “choose a confessor”. Francis selects wise advice from famous saints, to make his point gently, but firmly. We begin progress toward devotion by learning the way from a devout person. Francis goes on to say that director and person directed will profit most if they are friends. When we recall that devotion is love, it is clear that people on the road to love will love each other (*philo*).

Francis expands upon this natural process. “‘A faithful friend is a strong defense, and he who has found one has found a treasure. A faithful friend is the medicine of life and immortality, and those who fear the Lord find him’, Sir 6:14; 16. …these divine words apply primarily to immortality. For this union with God, we need, above all else, this faithful friend, who by advice and counsel, guides our actions, and thus protects us from the snares and deceits of the wicked one. For us, he will be a treasure of wisdom in affliction, sorrow, and failure. He will serve as a medicine to ease and comfort our hearts when afflicted by spiritual sickness. He will guard us from evil, and make our good still better. Should any infirmity come upon us, he will assist us, and keep it from being fatal.”[[37]](#endnote-37)

Francis encourages us to develop a friend who will help us achieve immortality. Some friends may help us attain excellent meals and fine wine. But these friends distract us from our eternal goal. A friend who treads the path to heaven is indeed both protection from harm, and medicine to heal ills. Daily life abounds in harm, which a devout friend can keep from becoming fatal. Because Francis describes common events, he resonates with us. Therefore, we share his vision of a spiritual director who helps us to heaven. So we seek such a director. Where is he; how shall we find him?

Francis asks: “Who shall find such a friend? The Wise Man answers: ‘those who fear the Lord’, Sir 6:16. [He means:] humble souls who sincerely desire to make spiritual progress. Since it is important for you, Philothea, to have a guide as you travel on this holy road to devotion, you must most insistently beseech God to provide you with one after his own heart. Have no misgivings in this regard, for he who sent down an angel from heaven, as he did to young Tobias, will give you a good and faithful guide. For you, such a director ought always to be an angel. When you have found him, do not look on him as a mere man. Do not place confidence merely in him, or in human learning, but rather in God, for He will befriend you, and speak to you by means of this man. God will put into his heart and mouth whatever is requisite for your welfare. Hence you must listen to him as to an angel who comes down from heaven to lead you to it. Open your heart to him with all sincerity and fidelity. Tell him clearly, and without deception or dissimulation, about what is good in you, and what is bad. By such means the good will be examined and approved, and what is bad will be corrected and repaired. You will be consoled and strengthened in your afflictions, and moderated and regulated in your consolations. You must have unlimited confidence in him, mingled with holy reverence, so that reverence will neither lessen confidence, nor confidence hinder reverence. Confide in him with a daughter’s respect for her father. Respect him with a son’s confidence in his mother. In short, such friendship must be strong and sweet, completely holy, completely sacred, completely divine, completely spiritual.”[[38]](#endnote-38)

We see that Francis expects God to provide an exceptional friend for us. If we desire to be devout, we take the advice that Francis provides. We insistently pray that God send us this spiritual friend and guide. Francis describes a marvel who surpasses mere mortals. That’s why Francis calls him an angel. How wonderfully marvelous it is that God does provide angels to guide Tobias and ordinary people. But seekers must be extraordinarily humble to accept God’s help. The bullies who roam our land call submissive people humble. But Francis seeks strong, rather than submissive, people. Strong people face the truth, and deal with it effectively. It is supremely true that we need help in this life. This truth is humility. Because we are truthful, we seek aid to overcome our trials. Those who are truthful enough to pray for spiritual directors find them. God sends His messenger, and speaks through him, as He did through all the angels in Scripture. This is the important truth: God guides us through human messengers, who deliver messages as angels do. This human director will function like an angel. Therefore, Francis says: “For you, such a director ought always to be an angel”.

What counts is our decision to accept God’s message from the man He sends. When we decide to open our heart to God’s message, God uses a man as an angel, to deliver the information. We trust God when we pray for a director. We trust God when He provides a director. We trust God when we follow the director’s directions. If we trust God enough to believe in His promise, then God will express whatever is best for us through this director. Then we can tell him all that is good and bad in us, as if we were speaking to God. Because God is eager to hear and heal us, He acts through the director to do just what we need. Francis recommends that we revere our director as innocent children revere their parents. Our decision to revere him opens God’s treasury of strength and sweetness for us. Perhaps we recognize here the fundamental activity that Francis recommends. It is love. Love strengthens and sweetens. Love unites in friendship. Divine love is holy, sacred, godly, and thereby completely spiritual. As he describes a loving director, Francis sketches how the higher loves unite. When we integrate *agape* and *philia* with positive *philautia*, we love increasingly as God loves. Jesus came to lead us to this integration. Integrated love is devotion. Each devout person embodies these abstract ideals.

But we have a practical problem. Where can we find such a director to achieve these high ideals? Francis replies: “For this purpose, choose one out of a thousand… For my part, I say one out of ten thousand. There are fewer men than we realize who are capable of this task. He must be full of charity, knowledge, and prudence. If any one of these three qualities is lacking, there is danger. I tell you again, ask God for him, and having once found him, thank his Divine Majesty, stand firm, and do not look for another, but go forward with simplicity, humility, and confidence, for you will make a most prosperous journey.”[[39]](#endnote-39)

To benefit entirely from this statement, remember how society worked at that time. Many priests had devoted themselves to sanctity. But there were some who fell short of the high standards that Francis set. Because there were tens of thousands of priests to choose from, Francis recommends selecting carefully to find that one-in-ten-thousand priest. Once the person finds this rare suitable director, Francis recommends sticking with him. Both points are very well taken. Each human interaction is dangerous because each of us is very sinful. Though we may not commit noticeable public sins, each of us is quite capable of the foulest sort of sin. Danger lurks everywhere because we are free to do anything. But that danger should not worry us, especially if we go forward with simplicity, humility, and confidence. Francis reminds us here to put ourselves entirely in God’s loving hands. Most of the danger arises from our attempts to dominate other people. Too often we pretend to be God. If we let God do His work His way, our journey to Him will be prosperous. If we interfere, and try to impose our way, our journey will fall into traps that impoverish us. Francis recommends genuine love of God, and perfect trust of His perfection. In our own time, Mother Teresa of Calcutta illustrated that total loving trust. How can be imitate Jesus more perfectly, and thus approach God more entirely?

**We Must First Begin by Purifying the Soul**

“‘The flowers have appeared in our land, the time of pruning the vines has come’, Cant 2:12. [In the Canticle, or Song of Songs, the Sacred Spouse says so.] What other flowers do we have in our hearts, Philothea, except good desires? As soon as they appear, we must take a pruning knife to remove from our conscience all dead and worthless works. Before an alien girl was permitted to marry an Israelite, she had to put aside her foreign clothing, pare her nails, and shave off her hair, Deut 21:12-13. So also a soul hoping for the honor of becoming spouse of the Son of God must ‘put off the old man, and put on the new’, Eph 4:22; 24, by forsaking sin, and removing and cutting away whatever obstructs union with God. For us, the beginning of good health is purging of our sinful tendencies.”[[40]](#endnote-40)

Francis begins his account of negating sin with the positive mystical poem called the Canticle, or Song of Songs. The verse he chooses describes the surge of Spring throughout the land which is recovering from harsh winter. This example reminds us that love springs forward with new life, if we accept God’s gift, and grow with His love. Flowers represent good desires, or blossoms of God’s life. Everything else hinders these flowers from growing. So we remove all the dead wood, to let the light shine on the leaves and flowers, which grow in proportion to the sun shining upon them. Francis did not know about photosynthesis, but we can imagine a spiritual equivalent of that biological action. God’s love shines on us to unite our decisions with His to make a kind of spiritual nourishment, akin to sugar or glucose that forms in sun-infused leaves. The result is the same: the soul and the plant grow. But worthless works, or decisions we made to serve ourselves, are hard to remove. We decide to commit these sins, so they grow out of our choices. They belong to us, as our very own. Therefore, we must make over our decisions to remove them. Like the foreign girl who wants to join the People of God, we must purge all old, sinful, decisions. Everything that “obstructs union with God” must go.

Francis describes famous people who purged themselves, first to convert and then to grow holy. “In a single instant, St. Paul was cleansed with a complete purgation, Act 9:1-9. So too were St. Catherine of Genoa, St. Mary Magdalen, St. Pelagia… Such purgation is as miraculous and extraordinary in the order of grace as resurrection from the dead is in the order of nature. Therefore, we should not look for it. The usual purgation and healing, whether of body or of soul, takes place only little by little, passing from one advance to another with difficulty and patience. Though the angels on Jacob’s ladder had wings, they did not fly. Instead they went up and down in order, step by step. The soul who rises from sin to devotion has been compared to the dawning of the day, Prov 4:18. [Dawn] does not drive out the darkness instantaneously, but only little by little. A slow cure, as the maxim says, is always surest. Diseases of the soul, as well as those of the body, come galloping on horseback, but leave slowly on foot.”[[41]](#endnote-41)

Francis agrees that instantaneous purging occurs for a few people. But this spiritual cure is as rare as physical resurrection. Therefore, we should not seek it. St. Paul’s conversion excites us, but it is not the standard model for conversion. Francis wants us to look beyond excitement to reality, beyond noteworthy exceptions to daily life. There we see that conversion is more like dawn, which creeps up on cat-feet, as Robert Frost notes, dispelling darkness bit by bit. Francis gives us memorable, down to earth examples, to help us fix the common way in mind. Then we can cooperate with God’s action, to advance slowly but surely. Slow and sure advance requires courage and patience, as Francis points out next.

“In this enterprise, we must have courage and patience, Philothea. What a pity it is to see souls who perceive themselves still subject to many imperfections, after striving to be devout for a while, and then begin to be dissatisfied, disturbed, and discouraged. They almost let their hearts give in to the temptation to give up everything, and go back to their old way of life. On the other hand, some souls are in extreme danger from an opposite temptation, because they think themselves cleansed of every imperfection on the very first day of their purgation. They regard themselves as perfect before they have scarcely begun, and try to fly without wings. They are in great peril of a relapse because they are too soon out of the physician’s care. Do not get up before the light has come, says the prophet, but ‘rise after you have sat down’, Ps 128:2. He himself practiced this lesson. Though already washed and cleansed, he asked to be washed and cleansed still more and more, Ps 50:3.”[[42]](#endnote-42)

Francis warns us against impatience, which destroys our peace. Just when we are settled into growing toward God, and are about to make great progress, we take our achievements for granted, and imagine great leaps forward. These false images fire us to insist on instant progress. In spite of our positive personal experience of gradual growth, we rush ourselves, and fall flat. We may so discourage ourselves that we relapse into old habits. Does that sound familiar? This is what Francis means by the temptation to give up everything, and go back to our old way of life. We can rush toward attractive images which are unattainable precisely because of their exaggerated glitter. We make progress by taking one step at a time. Taking 3 steps at a time causes accidents. Impatient impetuosity prohibits our progress. The opposite trend to premature satisfaction drowns us in complacency. If we pride ourselves on our perfection, because we have done a couple things right, we relapse into false glory. Our first couple steps toward God are just a good start. Francis quotes the Psalms to show how David desperately wanted to be cleansed again and again. This is the proper balance between impetuosity and complacency. If we remember how sick with sin we are, then we take the doctor’s advice, and progress gradually.

Francis tells us how long we must stay in the doctor’s care. “The work of purging the soul neither can nor should end except with our life itself. We must not be disturbed at our imperfections, since, for us, perfection consists in fighting against them. How can we fight against them unless we see them? How can we overcome them unless we face them? Our victory does not consist in being unconscious of them, but in refusing to consent to them. Refusing to consent to them is disapproving of them. To practice humility, it is absolutely necessary for us, at times, to suffer wounds in the spiritual warfare. But we are never vanquished unless we lose our life, or our courage. Imperfections and venial sins cannot deprive us of spiritual life. We lose it only by mortal sin. Therefore, it only remains for us to not lose courage. Save me, O Lord, from cowardice and discouragement, David says, Ps 54:9. Fortunately for us, in this war we are always victorious, provided that we are willing to fight.[[43]](#endnote-43)

This simple paragraph expresses the profound ideas behind Francis’ simple words. He sees that our earthly days are all trials. Each day that we awake, we know we have more sins to purge. That makes each day a trial of our resolve. What do we really want to do? Do we desire to love God? Then we must renounce our sins against Him, make reparation, and love Him more. We know that we love God if we love our neighbor, 1 Jn 4:20. But our neighbor is not lovable. True. But we look exactly as unlovable to him. Jesus teaches us to love our neighbor in spite of his sins. A way to remember His command is to rephrase it in familiar terms: “love your crooked little neighbor with all your crooked little heart”. If Francis were writing today, he might say something similar. Another profound insight that he provides is that “perfection consists in fighting against them”. Rather than discourage ourselves because we can’t eliminate our sins, we should encourage ourselves to keep fighting them. Perfection is exactly fighting again, and again. Francis enters this battle with us, supporting our efforts. Come out fighting, and keep fighting, he insists. To continue this struggle, Francis tells us to buck up our courage. Little sins are like wounds. Each one is far from fatal, but each one weakens us. So we pray to cure each one.

These days, polished ads, promising awesome products, confuse us. Advertising executives fill our imagination with fantasies. They flash glaring images of glittering success before our eyes. They increase the sound volume, striving to arouse us to purchase what they sell. They don’t mention the price in most ads. When they give a price, they insist that it is much less than the value of the product. Salvation from all our woes is right there, for a bargain. Cleverly, they display symbols signify honesty. They link genuine service with their products. Over the years, advertisers have debased almost all our natural symbols by extorting profit from them. Remember all the sports celebrities who have been milked dry in a few short months. These ads distract us more than anything Francis faced. So we need his advice more than his listeners did. We have more aggressive sensations to fight off, and more strident temptations to combat. But our basic process is the same that Francis recommends. Perfection is continuing the good fight against sin, no matter the opposition.

**The First Purgation: Mortal Sin**

“The first purgation we must make is of mortal sin…by the holy sacrament of penance. Look for the best confessor you can find. Then get some of the little books written to help your conscience make a good confession… Read them carefully, and note, point by point, in what way you have done wrong, from the first use of reason, down to the present hour. If you do not trust your memory, write down what you have noted. After you have prepared, and gathered together your sinful states of conscience, detest and reject them by the greatest acts of contrition and sorrow your soul can conceive. At the same time, keep in mind these four things: by sin you have: 1) lost God’s grace; 2) given up your place in paradise; 3) chosen the eternal pains of hell; 4) rejected God’s eternal love.”[[44]](#endnote-44)

Francis starts with mortal sin because it is greatest damage we do to ourselves. As its name implies, it kills God’s life in us. This way of speaking is common among us, but confusing because a sin can’t do anything at all. Instead, it is we sinners who kill God’s life. No one else can expel the gift of divine vitality. We must decide on our own to reject God’s divine life. Of course, no one rejects God directly and distinctly. He is too Good. Instead of straightforward rejection, each mortal sinner proposes some glitzy good. By restricting our view to that glitz, we can obscure the surpassing good of God’s life. For example, to commit murderer, we must elaborate imaginary benefits that follow killing our victim. We try to make it look like our only option. We focus so intently upon the proposed benefits of murder, that losing God’s life fades into the background. Actually, we exaggerate the proposed benefits. Often we invent them from whole cloth, and impose them by exciting ourselves. Every mortal sin begins with our lie about the good that will follow the sin.

That’s why, like a sledgehammer, our lie and our loss hit us so hard. Even if we sinners mobilize vast psychological force to deny our sin, the gross lie about the invented benefits crushes us. Then we reel from the sin of murder. Finally, the aching loss of God’s life oppresses us even more. We usually summarize this drastic result by saying that the sin disturbs our conscience. We may even waste the disturbance of mortal sin, and try to quiet our conscience by getting drunk or stoned or high. Addiction is a quite common attempt to sill the small voice that calls sinners back to God.

Today it is hard to listen to this small voice because of advertisement’s din. Ads urge us to consume useless gadgets instead of living God’s life. Consuming is another addiction we can use to dull conscience. “Shop until you drop” combines killing conscience with enriching the powers that advertise and sell useless items to impulse buyers. However, with a bit of effort, we can rise above the din of ads, to reach normal human existence. Then we can take the advice that Francis so graciously provides. We can find a confessor who will minister the sacrament of reconciliation to us. This divine gift is precisely the remedy for mortal sin. Each deadly sin damages the sinner most of all. But each fatal sin damages the Mystical Body of Christ because the sinner dies, just as one cell of our body dies. Moreover, each sin harms our totality as a society. No matter how private we attempt to keep our sins, other people suffer from them. Murder is obviously social, as it kills a member of society. This member has relatives and friends. So murder sets off a social ripple, damaging uncounted people. All other mortal sins set off similar ripples in society. Francis does not probe this facet of sin. But it is one of the basic reasons for seeking social interaction in this merciful sacrament of penance.

By confessing to another human, we admit our membership in a society. In our case this congregation is spread throughout the world in the visible Church. Whether our group is large of small, we seek a representative of the Mystical Body that we injured by mortal sin, so that we can beseech forgiveness from the Church. Though the confession itself is private for just two people, it is appropriately social by interaction with an ordained minister, selected by Christ. Going directly to God was the best we could do until Jesus instituted the sacrament of confession. Now that Christ has arranged this social forgiveness, will we insist that His efforts were wasted, because we can ask direct forgiveness from the Father? How much more natural it is to accept the mercy that Jesus provides? By confessing to Christ’s representative, we cooperate with His mercy, in exactly His way. After all, “He who sees me sees the Father”, Jesus says to Philip, Jn 12:45.

Once we resolve to confess our mortal sins, we need some help to identify them. Francis recommends some books by authors who were popular in his day. Similar books can help us today. By reading them, we find some of the mortal sins we had denied or suppressed. Incidentally, admitting repressed sin relieves us of the tremendous psychological pressure we put on ourselves to hide our sins. This is the first sign of Christ’s mercy. Instead of denying the very existence of our sins, we release the pressure by telling the truth. Imagine how much more pressure blows off in the actual confession. We save ourselves the exhausting effort of denying the sins that continue to exist, and fester. Letting the truth in, we cast off the burdens in our conscience. Specifically, we free ourselves from our decisions to lie our sins into oblivion.

The authors of the recommended books understand our plight, and provide expert help to let truth live again in our hearts. It is like a rush of fresh air into stagnant spaces, where we were stifling ourselves. In this rush, our stagnant memory may convulse when it rushes into long-suppressed freedom. So Francis recommends writing down the mortal sins, and lesser sins, we want to confess. By sweeping through our entire life of decisions, we prepare to purge ourselves of every troubling sin. This purging will be a great benefit for us, a tremendous relief, and a refreshment of our internal life in God. Francis notes the importance of external values: losing God’s gift of His life, losing heaven, choosing hell, and rejecting God’s infinite love. Finally, we see that internal renewal plus external reparation are irresistible benefit for us. Every reason in the world urges us to confess mortal sins. Lesser reasons urge us to confess venial sins.

Francis so loves confession that he elaborates: “Note carefully, Philothea, that I speak of a general confession covering your whole life. I readily grant that this is not always absolutely necessary. But I consider it exceedingly useful, in this opening period, and therefore I earnestly advise it. It frequently happens that the routine confessions of those who lead the common ordinary sort of life are filled with grave faults. Often they make little, or even no, preparation, and do not have sufficient contrition. Too often it happens that they go to confession with a tacit intention of returning to sin, since they are unwilling to avoid its occasions, or use the means necessary for amending their lives. In addition, a general confession summons us to know ourselves, arouses wholesome sorrow for our past life, makes us marvel at the mercy of God, Who has so patiently waited for us, brings peace to our hearts, calms our minds, excites us to good resolutions, provides our spiritual director with an opportunity to advise us more properly as to our condition, and opens our hearts to reveal ourselves with confidence in subsequent confessions. Since I speak here of a general renewal of your heart, and complete conversion of your soul to God by undertaking a devout life, it seems to me, Philothea, that I am right in advising you to make a general confession.[[45]](#endnote-45)

Isn’t this encouraging? Francis earnestly advises it Confession because of its multiple benefits. He notes that many ordinary people waste confession by committing one of the following grave faults. The first fault is failing to prepare. Some of us often refuse to adequately evaluate our conscience. If confession is just a habit, without sufficient examination to identify all sins and minor faults, we are not serious misses. Then we waste the exceeding value of this sacrament of mercy. The least we can do, after Jesus died for our sins, is to pay proper attention to our sins. Then we are as serious as Jesus was. That sincerity opens the miraculous healing sacrament that Christ created to remove sin. Without this proper attention, we can hardly arouse our sorrow for those sins. This is especially true for mortal sins, when we decided to kill God’s sacred life in our souls. With sorrow appropriate to our sins, we then decide to be properly contrite. Contrition is repenting in proportion to our guilt. Minor sins deserve minor contrition, while mortal sins require much more. Contrition comes to our English language from the Latin words *con* = with, and *tristia* = sorrow. With sorrow we admit that by our sins we betray at least three people. In the dimension of time, we first betray ourselves. In the dimension of importance, we first betray God. In the dimension of victim, we first betray at least one person, and probably others. Deciding to sin is deciding against ourselves, against God, and against others. These attacks damage us more severely than external attacks against our bodies. So we have more reason to bewail our moral wounds than our bodily ones. When we admit this truth, we become contrite.

Contrition is our most honest response to our moral failures. It opens the door of our heart, as Francis so eloquently says. If we open our heart to God, He cures it. His cure is so perfect that he renews us enough to enter His holy presence. Our innocence is the only casualty of our sins. God heals our heart-wounds, making us sound once more. With renewed vigorous health, we can convert to God, or turn with God, to do as He does. The Latin source of our English word is *con* = with, and *verto* = I turn. Contrition and conversion are like homesickness and going home. We suffer with our absence, and devoutly yearn to return to our divine family. Back where people love us, we heal once more. Our human family loves us more than anyone else, but not sufficiently for our deepest needs. We need to go home to God. There, He reestablishes our health. But we are often too sick for the journey home.

God’s love cures all sickness. Thus cured we can live God’s life with Him. Life with God is our natural condition. God created our first parents to be members of His Trinitarian Family. When we examine ourselves today, we find ourselves in rebellion against this Family. Our rebellion is so painful, and so devastating that we may insist that we are naturally sinful. But that insistence overreacts to our present sinful condition. Our natural condition is what Genesis describes when Adam and Eve walked with God in the Garden of Eden, Gen 3:8. Sin is so unnatural that it is precisely the absence of our natural loving union with God. He made us in His image and likeness so that we could freely choose to unite with Him. Contrition and conversion, leading to confession, enable us to eliminate mortal sin, reduce venial sins, and remove many of our sinless faults. That’s why Francis advises people to make a general confession.

Given the rarity of confession these days, perhaps we should review its benefits. We can start with a few facts. Renewal centers, like Medujurge, abound in people who surprise us by their eagerness to confess, and their happiness after receiving this sacrament of mercy. People come from all over the world to participate. It’s worth the trip just to see happy people emerging from confession. We probably know folks who went there just to observe, and joined the happy throng. Some even converted to Catholicism, and became devout. Watch out! True devotion is catching. Usually, we know people who went there in a semi-devout condition, and improved noticeably. At centers like these, devotion is white-hot, so even us smoldering wicks can catch fire, and blaze with our genuine natural flame. If we can’t go to a renewal center, we can go to confession here at home. If we make the effort, we experience the open-heartedness that Francis recommends. We can return to our natural life in Christ from our life so damaged by sin. Without traveling, we can see similar relief for us and others in confession. What’s next?

**The second Purgation, Namely of Affection for Sin**

“Although all the Israelites left Egypt in effect, not all of them left it in affection. Therefore, in the wilderness, many of them regretted losing the onions and fleshpots of Egypt, Num 11:4. Similarly, there are penitents who leave sin in effect, but do not leave it in affection. They resolve never to sin again, but they are reluctant to give up … the fatal delights of sin. Their heart renounces and shuns sin, but looks back at it, just as Lot’s wife looked back at Sodom, Gen 19:26. They abstain from sin like sick men abstaining from melons. They don’t eat them, but only because the doctor warns them that they’ll die if they do. But they begrudge giving them up. They talk about them, and would eat them if they could. They want to smell them at least, and envy those who can eat them. In such a way, weak, lazy, penitents abstain regretfully, for a while, from sin. They would like very much to commit sins if they could do so without being damned. They speak about sin with a certain petulance, and with liking for it, and think those who commit sins are at peace with themselves. A man who had resolved to take vengeance on another will change his mind in the confessional, but a little later, you will find him talking to his friends about his quarrel. He will say: ‘If it wasn’t for the fear of God, I would… It is very hard to forgive people… I wish to God that I could revenge myself.’ Although he is freed from his sin, he is still entangled in affection for it. Although he is out of Egypt in effect, he is still there in appetite, and in his longing for the garlic and onions on which he once glutted himself. He is like a woman who detests her illicit love affairs, but still likes to be courted and pursued. Alas, all such people are in great peril!’[[46]](#endnote-46)

With profound understanding, Francis describes people who have contrition enough to convert and confess, but yearn to return to sin. Forgetting the sorrow that sin necessarily generates, and exaggerating the pleasure of sin, they long to sin again. The Israelites who mourned for the onions forgot the slavery that accompanied them. We can imagine how hard their slavery was. Against that background, the onions were sparks of light in the vast darkness of their suffering. In the desert, there were no onions, but there was no slavery either. Their darkness turned to day. Their mistake was to yearn for the onions, but forget the slavery. We imitate them if we forget the sadness of sin, and exaggerate its pleasure, once confession frees us from its chains. Honestly there is very little fun in sin. Most of what we call pleasure in sin is anticipation of sensations that never arrive. At least the onions arrived on the Israelites’ plates in Egypt.

Even though sin is total waste, complete disappointment, and total loss, Francis describes the lies we tell ourselves about it. We often manufacture counterfeit images of great joy flowing from sin. Devils make even more enticing images. But our experience of sin shows that these images are false. Sin never provided the promised joy. Waves of nausea sweep over us exactly when we expected pleasure. We forget our desperate disappointment. Because we and we alone, impose our images, they are totally ours. We are proud of them. We insist that they are true. When we sin, their falsity scourges us with regret. The genius of this example from Francis is the contrast between onions and slavery. What a striking metaphor for fake image and real results! If we take our experience seriously, we see how disappointing sin is.

He further describes our affection for sin by the example of the sick man abstaining from, but longing for, melons. Perhaps a modern example would be the diabetic longing for sugar. He repents of eating sugar, largely because of the severe sickness it caused him. But he agitates himself with memories of eating sugar before diabetes, and longs for that taste. He forgets that the taste didn’t last, and wasn’t all that good while it lasted. But he works himself into frenzy because that dictator-doctor forbids him his delight. He fantasizes all sorts of delight that is not there when he eats sugar. These examples illustrate how we magnify false images, while forgetting real results. Definitely, we want to purge affection for sin from our hearts, to avoid the pain of these images and results.

So Francis explains: “Philothea, since you wish to live a devout life, you must not only cease to sin, but you must also purify your heart of all affection for sin. In addition to the danger of falling again, such base affections so lastingly weaken and weigh down your spirt, that is will be impossible to do good works promptly, diligently, and frequently, and it is in this that the very essence of devotion consists. In my opinion, souls who have recovered from the state of sin, but still retain such affections and weaknesses, are like girls who are pale in color, and although not really sick, act as if they are sick. They eat without appetite, sleep without getting any rest, laugh without joy, and drag themselves about rather than walk. In like manner, such souls do good, but with such spiritual weariness that it robs their good deeds of all grace, and the deeds themselves are few in number, and small in effect.”[[47]](#endnote-47)

No doubt, his examples move us. Probably, we have cut off the top of a weed, only to see it grow back from the root. Even as children, we learn to uproot weeds. Similarly, we need to purge the source of our sins. This source is well named “affection” because it is a type of love, like *eros*, that urges us to advance, to approach something, in order to unite with it. In Latin *a* = to, and *facio* =make, as in “to make something mine”. If we want to make sin ours, we show affection for sin. This affection is the root from which sin sprouts. As Francis notes, we must purge the root, to stop the sin from spurting forth again. Above all, we want to stop nurturing the root of sin by lying that sin is good. Sin is the very opposite of good. Sin is actually the absence of good which should be there. That’s why only a lie can make it look good. Those Jews who longed for leeks and onions had to lie about their goodness. They had to say that returning to Egypt to get its onions would not re-enslave them. Really, to get the negligible onions, they would forfeit their immensely valuable freedom. Francis gives this shining symbol of sin. We know we must exaggerate the supposed goodness of what we choose when we sin. When we actually choose it, we discover painfully that the goodness isn’t there. Then we are bitterly sad because we betrayed ourselves. Moreover, truth be told, we are ashamed for betraying God as well. Similarly, sadness shadows us for betraying others. This is what Francis means by “weaken and weigh down your spirit”. Thus enfeebled and shackled, we prevent ourselves from doing the good that gladdens us.

Francis gives us an excellent example of a healthy girl who extorts sympathy by playing the sick victim. But the act backfires, because the real results of this lie are loss of her natural appetite, rest, joy, and sprightly step. If she insists upon imposing her lie, its falsity corrodes true goodness so quickly that she makes herself really sick. Even if she rebounds from this play-acting, she makes herself a liar by deciding to lie. As usual, sin never produces the benefits it promises. We could dramatize this reality by calling sin a liar and a cheat, betraying us every time.

Francis gives us an example of spiritual weariness. What is that? It is the spiritual equivalent of physical exhaustion. When we do good things half-heartedly, we wear ourselves out. When half our heart is missing from the deed, whatever we do is only half-done. So we suffer self-defeat at the decision level, in the invisible moral realm, and at the production level, in the visible physical realm. People notice our shoddy product, and avoid both it and us. So God’s gift of life, His own vitality, can’t exist in our mangled deed. Our half-decision is also half-rejection. This is what God means by lukewarm, Rev 3:16. Half-rejection is enough to turn His stomach, and He will vomit us out of His mouth. God is 100% for us. Therefore, we want to be 100% for Him. If we purge our affection-for-sin, we advance toward being 100%. Then our service-deeds become more numerous and more effective. Hopefully, Francis convinces us to purge our affection for sin. Now how do we manage this second purgation? What specifically should we do?

**The Means for Making this Second Purgation**

“The highest motive for advancing to this second purgation is a strong, living conviction, of the great evils sin brings upon us. In this way, we arrive at a deep, intense, contrition. No matter how slight our contrition may be, provided only that it is genuine, and especially when it is joined to the power of the sacraments, it cleanses us sufficiently from sin. So too, when it is great and intense, it cleanses us from every affection for sin. A slight, weak, hatred or grudge results in an aversion to the person we dislike, and leads us to avoid his company. If it is a mortal, violent, hatred, we not only shun and detest him, but we even loathe, and find unendurable the conversation of his relatives, parents, and friends. We cannot even stand his picture, or anything belonging to him. In like manner, when a penitent hates sin with only a weak, but still genuine contrition, he truly resolves never to sin again. But when he hates it with a strong, active contrition, he not only detests sin, but also the affections, connections, and occasions that lead to it. Philothea, we must increase our contrition and repentance as much as possible, and extend it to everything having the least relation to sin. At her conversion, Mary Magdalen so effectively lost taste for her sins, and the pleasure once taken in them, that she never again thought about them. David affirms abhorrence, not only of sin, but also of all the ways and paths that lead up to it, Ps 118:104; 128. The soul’s rejuvenation consists in this, as does the renewal of the eagle, Ps 102:5.”[[48]](#endnote-48)

Francis brings to life this highest motive, or the greatest reason, for this purging affection for sin. He shows a simple experience that leads us to understand our need to eradicate love for sin. He urges us to remember how we devastated ourselves by sin. If we honestly review the actual sorrow that sin imposes, we become authentically contrite. Though we hurt ourselves first, and most intensely, we also attack God’s honor, His truth, and His goodness when we sin. Moreover, sin almost always also harms our neighbors. These are the reasons why deep, intense contrition penetrates the moral marrow of our sinful bones. Our first contrition does not include full sorrow from our soul. There is too much denial to that we need to overcome. We must peek through the smoke screen we lay to deceive ourselves. But even the slightest genuine repentance can start our revival rolling. When we accept Christ’s mercy in the sacrament that He created to heal us, our spark of contrition can burst into flame. Jesus knows how weak we are, and provides crutches to help us learn to walk the right moral road again. Using His sacrament of confession is the best way to thank Him for His help. In confession, Jesus provides a concrete symbol that we can see, hear and feel. His sacrament then achieves invisibly, in our soul, what it symbolizes. Francis emphasizes this act of mercy, and invites us to participate.

Thus amplified by Christ’s supernatural sacrament, our contrition rises toward its worthy standard. On the way, our progress follows the homey example that Francis gives. Just as sinful hatred spreads from the enemy to all that sustains him, so too, purgation of sin spreads from each sin to affection for that sin. This affection is the root which sustains sin. After that negative example, France provides the positive example of Mary Magdalen, reformed prostitute. Her love of Jesus quickly and completely replaced the love she tried to impose by sex-abuse.

Because sex-abuse is wide-spread, we can profit from a clear view of it. God generously provides maximum sensory pleasure to parents who make babies. They deserve that pleasure because they must give themselves without reserve to raising these babies. For that reason, coitus-climax is the peak of sensory delight. Within the profound love of God, expressed in family life, loving sex sustains parents through great suffering. But people can reject God’s plan to reward parents. They can demand parental pleasure while rejecting children. This attempt to dominate the reward, without doing the work, reverses God’s plan. This disorder at the foundation of life devastates the people who impose it. They reverse giving to taking. This attempt backfires, obviously, in the wide varieties of aberrations people impose on contraceptive sex.

Some of us are the right age to know America before and after Woodstock. We witnessed millions of people relatively happy with family life. Then we witnessed the self-destruction of sex abuse. Many people strove with might and main to dominate sex-pleasure. Because they sought pleasure without progeny, they vitiated the purpose of procreation. In this project, they imitated Mary Magdalen during her prostitute period. She tried to force pleasure without accepting its cause. Consequently, recent repeaters of her mistake experienced the same bitter failure. Mary Magdalen was an outstanding example of bitter failure before her conversion. So her contrition and conversion is a powerful positive example. She continues to shine through two thousand years, and shall be a beacon of salvation for all eternity. Once she properly placed her love, she never sought to misplace her love. She uprooted her sinful affection.

Similarly, David’s psalms express significant ways to uproot affection for sin. Francis says that this is the point of rejuvenation for the soul. Because mortal sin kills God’s life in the soul, the resurrection of His life by confession rejuvenates the soul. Recall our personal experiences of this revival. We can’t emphasize enough how important this reality is. Francis provides this finale to his general review of how to purge sin-affection: the downcast eagle soars again!

Then he offers us some specific practices which are so simple that we can adopt them easily. “To attain such conviction and contrition you must faithfully practice the following meditations. By the help of God’s grace, they will be very helpful in rooting out of your heart both sin and the chief affections for it. I have composed them for this purpose. Use them in the order in which I have placed them, taking only one each day, if possible in the morning, which is the best time for spiritual exercises. Think of them during the rest of the day. If you are not yet accustomed to meditating, read about it in the second part.”[[49]](#endnote-49)

**The First Mediation: On Our Creation**

“Preparation: Place yourself in God’s presence, and beg him to inspire you. 1) Then consider that some years ago you were not yet existing in the world; you were nothing. My soul, where were we at that time? The world had already existed for a long time, but of us there was nothing yet. 2) God drew you out of that nothingness, to make you what you now are. He has done so solely from his own goodness, without need of you. 3) Consider the nature God has given you. It is the highest in the visible world. It is capable of eternal life, and of being perfectly united to His Divine majesty.”[[50]](#endnote-50)

With simple acts like this we can’t go wrong. If we simply read these words, and think the thoughts they suggest, we are off to a great start. God’s presence helps us relax because He loves us. With a little practice, we grow more relaxed in God’s loving presence. Wherever we are in our developing friendship with God, His presence always urges us on toward Him. He extends further, and invites us to join Him. There is always more to His love. So we are always more at home with Him, growing in knowing and loving Him. Francis calls to our minds our fundamental facts. Before our conception, we did not exist. After conception, we existed in mom’s womb for about nine months. At birth, we appeared in public for the first time. What a wonder our creation was! The world got along quite well without us for millions of years. We were nothing during those many years. How did we come to be?

Francis wonders his way through to an answer: God drew us out of nothingness. He created us. He made us exist. He didn’t need us. He didn’t owe us anything. So His spontaneous overflow of love made us be. He loved us into existence. Our attentive reading of the simple words Francis gives us sets our minds aglow with these ideas. These ideas express realities more important to us than any others. All we have to do is read these words to set our minds wondering, questioning, and yearning to learn more about God’s loving creation.

Naturally, we seek to know what God gave us by creating us. He gave us all sorts of things. We call this huge set of gifts human nature. As we unpack the contents of our nature, we find growth in many dimensions. Even the least little glimpse of our growth amazes us. If we compare our general being, or nature, to other natures, we conclude with Francis that our nature is the highest of all that we can see. We are the only visible beings that are always questing for God. Obviously, our knowledge reaches beyond the present, back into the past, and forward forever into an unending future. That is what Frances means by “we are capable of eternity”. Eternal advance into God perfectly matches our forever unfolding desire for perfect union with Him. In short, these three considerations admit, accept, and amplify our best qualities. These considerations enable us to respond lovingly, and renew our resolution to pursue God. His truth reveals His goodness. His Goodness arouses our desire, or emotions, and affections. So Francis launches the next act of this meditation, and capitalizes on our innate desire, which expresses our yearning affection for God. Then he proposes that we resolve to do good.

“Affections and resolutions: 1) Humble yourself profoundly before God. With the Psalmist, say with all your heart: ‘Lord, before you I am truly nothing. How were you mindful of me, so as to create me?’ Ps 38:7; 8:5. Alas, my soul, you were engulfed in that ancient nothing, and would still be there, if God had not drawn you out of it. What could you have done in that nothingness? 2) Thank God: My great and good Creator, how great is my debt to you, since you were moved to draw me out of nothing, and by your mercy to make me what I am! What can I ever do to bless your holy name in a worthy manner, and to render thanks to your immense mercy? 3) Rebuke yourself. Alas, my Creator, instead of uniting myself to you in love and service, I have become a total rebel by my disorderly affections. I have separated myself from you, strayed far from you in order to embrace sin, and shown no more honor to your goodness than if you were not my Creator. 4) Abase yourself before God. My soul ‘know that the Lord is your God He has made you, and you have not made yourself’, Ps 99:3. O God, I am ‘the work of your hands’, Ps 137:8. 5) From now on, then I will no longer be self-complacent, since of myself I am nothing. O dust and ashes, or rather you who are truly nothing, why do you glory in yourself? To humble myself, I resolve to do such and such things [personal specific items], to suffer such and such humiliations [individual definite items]. I desire to change my life, and henceforward to follow my Creator, and to find honor in the state of being that he has given me, employing it entirely in obedience to his will by such means as will be taught me, and about which I will ask my spiritual director.”[[51]](#endnote-51)

After reminding ourselves of the foundational truth that God created us, we immediately see how good His creation is. So we respond to His great gift with affections or emotions that rouse even more of our love. The goodness of this truthful response attracts us, arousing our emotions to move us out of ourselves into God. In a sense, we stoke our emotions until they erupt to cast us toward God. This is our natural urge to ever closer union with Love Himself. Simply reading what Francis wrote rouses sentiments exquisitely expressed in the emotive poetry of the psalms. Francis quotes them because of their eloquent expressions of profound emotions. When we remind ourselves of God’s love by reading these psalms, we rouse our loving emotions. They range from negative regret for sin to positive repentance, to enthusiastic desire to improve our pursuit of God. By this emotional explosion, we roust ourselves to rush back to God. At His feet, we thank Him for His marvelous mercy. This infinite mercy moves Him to forgive our sins. In this loving reunion, we rebuke ourselves for rebelling. Our roused emotions help us recognize how stupid it is for us (nothing) to revolt against God (Everything). Because we sin by fixing our affections upon revolt, we repent by fixing our affections on God. Francis reminds us that we deny God’s goodness poured forth by creating us, and must repent.

Sadly, we deny God’s goodness by trying to rip it off for ourselves. Instead of gratefully accepting the gift of His goodness, we claim to be God. We take His place by making decisions that belong to Him. Our decision to sin absurdly seeks to lift ourselves beyond our created being, into God’s uncreated Being. We want divine prerogatives on our demand. Instead, we should accept them when God gives them. To correct the drastic absurdity of our sin, we must reverse our decision. We must repent by lowing ourselves, or abasing ourselves before God. In stark reality, we are nothing, not even dust and ashes. Yet, when we sin, we rise up to rebel against our loving Creator. We can’t be sorry enough for such sin. We urgently need to repent it. When we repent, we repeat our steps, this time heading in the right direction. Just as we work ourselves into an emotional fever to force our sin, so we should rouse our emotions to relax into repentance. This proper use of affections helps purge our emotions of the disorder we impose by whipping emotions up to sin. Francis reminds us that we sin with all our being, and need to repent totally. Sin is not abstract, not external. Instead it is our decision to commit all our being to demand good. To correct sin, we must commit all our being to accept good.

That is why Frances ends with resolutions to oppose sin. Instead of choosing to rebel, we resolve to obey. Instead of hating, we resolve to love. Instead of destroying order, we resolve to restore order. It is hard for us sinners to correct our past sins. It is hard to reverse our decisions. So we try to weasel out of repentance. One way is to lose ourselves in generalities. But, because our sins are specific, our repentance must be specific. Sins impose definite, objective harm. Healing this harm is hard. Replacing what we took away challenges us. Francis realizes that we may not know how to put back what we took away. Therefore, we seek help from our spiritual director. He sees beyond our self-imposed limitations. When we make this resolution, we can conclude our meditation. Francis shows how to resolve our prayer.

“Conclusion: 1) Give thanks to God: ‘Bless my God, O my soul, and let all my being praise his holy name’, Ps 102:1; 11. His goodness has drawn me out of nothing, and his mercy has created me. 2) Offer: O my God, with all my heart. I offer you the being you gave me. I dedicate and consecrate it to you. 3) Pray: O God, strengthen me in these affections and resolutions. O holy Virgin, recommend them to the mercy of your Son together with all those for whom I am bound to pray [specify]. Say an Our Father and a Hail Mary. After completing your prayer, go back over it for a moment, and out of the considerations you have made, gather a little devotional bouquet to refresh you during the rest of the day.”[[52]](#endnote-52)

Reading this simple meditation shows us that we can do it in ten minutes. We can also extend our meditation, as we improve skill to pray more effectively. Francis designed it for working people, to fit in their busy schedule. Rounding out the process concludes the prayer with thanks to God. Notice how the concluding Psalm quotation relates to the overall theme: creation from nothing. This completion satisfies us, refreshing us to face daily life, and its many frustrations. So we offer His gifts back to God. We develop our devotion by our decision to recycle God’s gifts. By concluding with a prayer, we relax into God’s love. In His devoted care, we select some parts of our mediation which pleased us the most. These selections are in spirit what picking a bouquet of flowers is in matter. They remind us of delightful moments with our beloved during prayerful meditation. Just as the beauty of the blended colors, and the aroma of the combined scents, of flowers will sustain us in upcoming daily stress, so do the spiritual beauty and scent sustain us.

Isn’t that a fine way to initiate our day? It’s short, sweet, and simple. But it’s also powerful. This ten minutes of meditation in God’s loving presence strengthens us spirituality to overcome the spiritual strife ahead. When we review His gifts, we orient ourselves to the best, truest, and most interesting actions of our lives. Thus oriented, we are likely to find the good, true, and fascinating gifts that God prepared for us this day. Even when struggles beset us, we can face life with more conviction and power because we reflect on God’s love. If we decide to stop imposing ourselves where do not belong, we reduce our frustrations. Similar resolutions improve our lives in similar ways. Then our lives become more orderly, less frazzled, more satisfactory, less disappointing, because we accept the fact: of ourselves we are nothing.

Immediately, we imagine the improvements we can make by daily meditations like this. We picture how relaxed we are in God’s presence. His love is so reassuring, on a spiritual level, that we blossom much more than we did in family love, on a more familiar level. We set ourselves straight by using this meditation to face our failures, reject our sins, resolve to improve, and settle upon specific good deeds to perform. Achieving these good deeds is so estimable that our self-esteem blooms toward the level that God wants for us. Our achievement in this prayer clarifies the purpose and value of our lives. By using God’s loving gifts to love Him and neighbors, we gain righteous rewards. There is no limit to our continuing increase in knowledge and love, or our share of meaning and value. Therefore, this meditation is like a field of flowers. The sight and the scent overwhelm us. These familiar experiences in the material sphere relate in the same way in the spiritual sphere. By meditation, we emerge from spiritual darkness into spiritual light, from confinement into full freedom, from stinking sin into a field of fragrant flowers. Prayer enables us to be at ease in God, and to plan daily improvements in His love. If we take a bouquet of these flowers with us, this corsage will remind us of this loving visit with God, and keep us going during hard times. Francis provides many of these delightful meditations. Let’s consider the next one.

**The Second Meditation: On the Purpose for Which We Were Created**

“Preparation: place yourself in God’s presence. Beseech him to inspire you. Considerations 1) God placed you in this world, not because he needs you in any way. You are altogether useless to him. He exercises his goodness in you by giving you his grace and glory. For this purpose he gave you an intellect to know him, a memory to keep him in mind, a will to love him, an imagination to picture his benefits, eyes to see his wonderful works, a tongue to praise him, etc. 2) Because he placed you in this world to perform those acts, you should reject all actions contrary to them. Contrary acts are empty and useless. 3) Consider the unhappiness of worldly people, who never think of all this, but live as if they believe themselves created only to build houses, plant trees, pile up wealth, and do frivolous things.”[[53]](#endnote-53)

Francis reminds us of basic realities. We repose most securely in God’s presence. As an example, a little boy who stuttered badly, spoke clearly when he prayed aloud. Asked why, he replied: “God loves me”. His experience illustrates a fundamental reality for us all. That’s why we initiate prayer by entering God’s loving presence. Like a distracted child, we ask for God’s inspiration, so that we can settle down and pay attention. Then we read the considerations to help us focus upon stark realities. The powerful negative shocks us: we are altogether useless to God. But it paves the way for the reassuring positive fact: God loves to give us His grace and glory. All our abilities are His gifts. We should use them to know Him better. If we use them for that exalted purpose, we enjoy using them, and derive maximum benefit from all His gifts.

However, we often misuse His gifts, causing ourselves pain and sorrow. Naturally, we should reject every misuse of God’s gifts, Now that we are sure that God created us to glorify Him, we know how to use all our abilities. Misusing them destroys God’s order, driving us into disorder. Disorder can not stand on its own. Instead of being something, it is a totally negative lack of order, in the midst of existing order. That’s why we stumble when we try to understand disorder. It is not understandable, because it is a deficit. It is a missing order. Re-ordering this disorder restores the order. Then we can observe it. A sinner who imposes disorder disrupts peace, destroys joy, and eradicates virtue. Sin makes no sense at all. When we decide to sin, we fracture the former unity of our soul, and we take some goodness away from whatever we misuse. That’s why Francis calls these contrary acts “empty and useless”. When we’re safe in God’s loving presence, we can afford to face the fact that our sins disrupt us. We can tell the truth, namely that sins destroy more than they produce.

This truth calls to mind the majority of people who are so unhappy that they can’t stand it. They drive themselves nuts trying to win commercial competitions. When they pile up wealth, they worry that someone will take it away. So they waste all their efforts. To distract themselves from this misery, they frequently fly into frivolous behavior like mad parties, substance abuse, and addictions. These temptations assault us. But if we turn a clear eye on riches-worshiping people, we see how wasted their lives are. They refuse to use their abilities as God intended, so they waste their resources. It’s good to build houses, but that is not our primary purpose. If we build houses, plant trees, and gain some wealth while glorifying God, then we order them into proper perspective. God gave us this purpose in life: to orderly arrange the gifts He provides. Considering these gifts carefully, Francis proposes appropriate responses to both their goodness and sin’s evil.

“Affections & resolutions. 1) Humble yourself, and rebuke your soul for its misery, which up to now has been so great that it has seldom, or never, reflected on this. Alas, you will say, what did I think about, O my God, when I did not think of you? What did I remember when I forgot you? What did I love when I did not love you? Alas, I should have fed upon the truth, but I glutted myself with vanity, and served the world which was made only to serve me. 2) Detest your past life. I renounce all vain thoughts and useless plans. I abjure all hateful and foolish memories. I reject all false and treacherous friendships, all wasted wretched deeds, all useless self-indulgence and onerous pleasures. 3) Turn to God. My God and my Savior, you shall henceforward be the sole object of my thoughts. I will no longer turn my mind to thoughts that displease you. Every day of my life, my memory will be filled with your great mercy that has been so sweetly shown to me. You shall be the joy of my heart, and the sweetness of my affections. The trifling, foolish, things which I have hitherto devoted myself to, the vain uses to which I have put my days, and the affections that have filled my heart, shall from now on be looked on with horror. For this intention I will use such and such [personal specific items] remedies.”[[54]](#endnote-54)

In this hard-hitting reflection, Francis sees the depths of our sinful souls. His vision is clear, and his description precise. Our souls are indeed miserable. Our misery has so terrified us that we refused to look at it, much less reflect on it. In his poetic way, Francis sighs “Alas, what did I think about, O my God, when I did not think of you?” In God’s loving presence, we can face our misery, and ask these penetrating questions. What was into us when we were not into God? How could we put something else in God’s place? Nothing is worth nearly as much as God. How could we replace Him with some creature? How devastating this decision is. We put some unworthy idol in our heart where God should be. Instead of feeding on God’s truth, we gobbled vanity, less substantive than smoke. We sin to fill us, but sin empties us. If we try to consume a vacuum, we empty ourselves. God made the world to serve us. But we revolt against God’s gift. We seek to serve some minor creature. How backward can we be? The more clearly we see sin, the stupider it is.

Therefore we detest our past sins, renounce all vain thoughts and useless plans. When we sin, we tear ourselves apart. We revolt by turning the abilities God gave us against Him. These sinful decisions are detestable. Francis gives a few details, including treacherous friendships, wretched deeds, self-indulgence, and onerous pleasures. All of these choices betray us. We try to impose friendly appearances where friendship is missing. This wretched lie disturbs us. We try to indulge ourselves, but these disorders do their thing. They disorder us. Therefore they drag us down instead of lifting us up. They become burdensome, or onerous.

On the contrary, if we do something out of love to serve, then pleasure lifts our decision like a gentle breeze. But if we seek pleasure instead of the good deed, we disorder ourselves. Then pleasure disappears, and a heavy burden of guilt descends upon us. Perhaps most devastating of all is the fact that we brought this disaster upon ourselves. This sad but true review of our sins helps us reject them. Francis can now conclude his penetrating prayer.

“Conclusion: 1) Thank God who has made you for so exalted an end: Lord, you have made me to forever enjoy your immeasurable glory. When shall I be worthy of it, when shall I bless you as I ought? 2) Offer: My beloved Creator, I offer you these affections and resolutions [make personal ones] with all my heart and soul. 3) Pray: I beseech you, O God, to look with favor on my desires and intentions, and give your holy blessing to my soul, so that it may accomplish them through the merits of the Blood your blessed Son shed upon the Cross… Make a little spiritual bouquet.”[[55]](#endnote-55)

As we see, these meditations are quite short, but go directly to our heart. If we pray this way, we become more devout. If we read the words that Francis wrote, and agree with them, we advance toward God. This method of prayer turns us toward God’s flaming love. Watch out. His blaze can enkindle us. We can catch fire, and become a holocaust of devotion. Perhaps the main effect of this prayer is to rise above the work-a-day world, into the eternal destiny that God intends for us. He created us to rise from boredom into glory. He made us to elevate from endless strife into pure love. In spite of noisy people who shout that life is merely meaningless struggle, God made us for complete peace forever in His love. That’s why He gave us minds to think beyond mere sensory appearances, and wills to choose beyond what the majority must do. When we transcend space and time by thinking, we experience our exalted destiny. We appreciate God’s gift of immortality, to be with Him eternally. That appreciation moves us to thank Him, to offer ourselves to him in return, and to pray to improve our behavior. We want to unite our desires, intentions, and choices. Jesus does the heavy lifting for us, as Francis notes. Christ’s merits, earned by dying for us, take our sins away, and enable us to unite with God. If we accept these merits, and cash them in, God’s love expands in us. This mystery of mercy soars beyond our understanding. But that’s exactly where it should be. And it’s exactly why we enjoy gazing at it. It’s infinity banishes boredom. We employ it to unite more entirely with our loving God. We don’t need to comprehend God to love Him, any more than we need to comprehend mother to love her. As we close this fine mediation, we select from it a few of its more fragrant bits to sniff during the day, to refresh ourselves when work gets stuffy. This is our “spiritual bouquet”. Once accustomed to this simple expansion of prayer, we can profit from yet another meditation.

**Third Meditation: On God’s Gifts**

“Preparations: Place yourself in God’s presence. Beseech him to inspire you.

Considerations: 1) Consider the corporeal benefits that God has bestowed on you. They include: the body itself, goods provided to maintain it, health, lawful comforts, friends, aids, and helps. Consider all this in contrast to so many other persons, more deserving than yourself, but without these blessings. Some are disabled in body, health, or organs. Others are left helpless under oppression, insult and infamy. Still others are ground down by poverty. God has not decreed that you should be so miserable. 2) Consider your gifts of mind. How many men are there in the world who are dull of mind, mad, or insane? Why are not you among them? It is because God has favored you. How many are there who have been brought up harshly, and in gross ignorance, while God’s providence has brought you up in freedom and dignity! 3) Consider your spiritual favors. Philothea, you are a child of the Church. From your childhood, God has taught you to know him. How often he has given his sacraments to you! How often you have received his inspirations, interior lights, and admonitions for your amendment! How often has he forgiven your faults! How often has he delivered you from those occasions of damnation to which you have been exposed! Were not all those past years a time of leisure and opportunity to improve your soul’s good? By noting each particular thing, you perceive, in some small way, how gentle and gracious God has been to you.”[[56]](#endnote-56)

As usual, Francis accomplishes a great deal quickly. He recommends that we retreat away from contentious society, to enter God’s loving presence. Relaxed in His love, we beg him to breathe His Holy Spirit into us, so that we can rise above continually unreliable sensations, into consistently reliable spiritual activity. With His inspiration, we review the gifts that God gave us. The obvious ones are our body, and its marvelous parts. The body as a whole is a tremendous gift. By, in, and through it, we come closer to God. By, in, and through, Jesus, God sanctified human flesh, divinizing it by His presence. By, in, and through Baptism, we become one with Christ’s body, the Church. God in His flesh saved us from sin by taking all our sins upon Himself. By dying in His flesh on the cross, he redeemed our flesh. He invites us to unite with Him, body and soul in His body. No wonder that Francis appreciates “the body itself”. In addition, all its parts are wonderfully coordinated to serve our advance into God. All external supports of our body overflow from God’s love into our grasp. If we use them properly, we foster healthy bodies. Even the leper, so far from health, enjoys blessings beyond our ability to measure. Consider the millions of other people who are less well-endowed with God’s blessings than we. When we view our obvious gifts, we leave cloudy doubts behind, and emerge into the sunshine of God’s love.

From visible bodily gifts, Francis advances to invisible mental gifts. He encourages us to rejoice at our spiritual capacity. If we concentrate upon our positive gifts, we can be truly grateful. Moreover, a glance around us shows millions of people whose mental gifts fall short of ours. How grateful we should be for the mental blessings we enjoy! Reflection on them increases our appreciation for our intellectual ability. On top of that, of our opportunities to exercise this ability abound. In other parts of his *Devout Life* Francis gives specific examples of our various abilities.

For now, he advances into our spiritual gifts. His short review is enough to remind us how blessed we are. No doubt, reading these considerations inspires each of us to add our own personal blessings to this general list. The more personal our reflections are, the more completely we engage in this prayer of appreciation. Awesome as our gifts are, more await us, if we use our gifts to increase our love of God. Francis induces us toward improved personal interaction with God because He loves us, and wants to converse. That is exciting! Really exciting. To rouse us even more, Francis concentrates on affections and resolutions in the following passage.

“Affections and resolutions: 1) Marvel at God’s goodness. How good my God has been to me! How good indeed! Lord, how rich is your heart in mercy, and how generous in good will! My soul, let us always recall the many graces he has shown to us. 2) Marvel at your own ingratitude. What am I, O Lord that you are mindful of me? Ps 8:5. And how great is my unworthiness! Alas, I have trodden your blessings underfoot. I have abused your graces, and have perverted them into dishonor and contempt of your sovereign goodness. I have opposed the depths of my ingratitude to the depths of your grace and favor. 3) Arouse yourself to make this acknowledgement. Rise, my heart, resolve to correct my faithless, ungrateful, and disloyal response to this great benefactor. And how shall my soul be henceforth wholly subject to God, who has wrought so many wonders and graces in me and for me? 4) Philothea, keep your body safe from such and such [personal items] pleasures, and consecrate it to the service of God, who has done so much for it. Set your soul to know and acknowledge him by such exercises as are needed for that purpose. Use diligently all the Church’s means to save yourself, and to love God. Yet, O my God, I will be assiduous in prayer, and at the sacraments. I will listen to your holy work, and put your inspirations and counsels into practice.”[[57]](#endnote-57)

So full of vitality is Francis, that his heart overflows in these words. We can see him welling up into spasms of love for God’s goodness. We join him by reflecting upon our personal gifts, that come directly from God’s hand. Our supreme gift is Christ’s death on the cross. While we can observe the event itself, we cannot observe its infinite effects. When we look at a representation of Innocence dying for our sins, so much flows from the crucifix that we can’t describe all of our experience. The fragments that we describe lift us into greater mystery. If we make the effort to pray from observation into effects, then Jesus tells us more of what He does on the cross. Gradually, we find more of God’s infinite mercy there. A little reflection uncovers the immensity of His love. Each of us treasures some personal experience of God’s care, expressing His merciful love on the cross. Francis reminds us that we should reproach ourselves for forgetting God’s gifts. We resolve to remind ourselves of the flood of benefits from our loving Father. We regret our ingratitude, and sally forth to correct our sins and faults. Because of His infinite merciful love, we want to do what God wants. He is so good to us that we arouse ourselves to be better to Him.

This general resolution is a good start, but Francis reminds us to pick out our particular failings, and correct them particularly. Every time he mentions “such and such” he intends us to fill in that blank with our specific sins, repentance, and resolution to improve. In this case, he wants us to choose the indulgence, like a second piece of cake, which harms us because we prefer the promise of pleasure to consuming the right balance of food. Both pleasure and food are God’s gifts. The food is essential, while the pleasure is incidental. In fact, the pleasure is more shadowy and fleeting than we wish. But we must admit that pleasure is like a diaphanous aura around using creatures well. That’s why, if we try to seize pleasure, it vanishes. When we try to trap the pleasure of eating cake, we fail. If we are realistic, we quit chasing rainbows. However, we often try to trap the pleasure of another piece, as if more would be better. Over-eating cake harms us, without capturing the pleasure we seek. Usually, our maximum pleasure occurs during our first bite. Most disappointing still, the aroma of the cake before the bite may be all the pleasure we get. Subsequent bites not only do not increase pleasure, but usually decrease it. If we pay attention to our actions, we learn a great deal about living well. The cliché becomes a cliché because it is all too true: “An instant on the lips; forever on the hips”.

We live well in order to please God, Who gave us life. He wants us to live His own life exceptionally well for all eternity. Our magnificent destiny in God’s Life should move us to joyful service every day of this mortal life. That’s why Francis reminds us to pray often, and to frequent the sacraments. Those activities maximize our profit from the gifts Jesus gives us in His Church. These gifts surpass creatures. We are so fixed upon creatures that we struggle to appreciate the spiritual benefits that Christ bestows. By meditations like these, we take baby steps upward toward God. Because God came to us in Jesus, we can behold His divine Person. We can look at His loving life, listen to His Wisdom, and learn to be more devout. The conclusion of prayer is to put His inspirations and counsels to practical effect in daily life.

Throughout these meditations, Francis considers the most important events of our lives, and our utterly vital relationship to God. Weaving these main strands of human existence into a single fabric, he includes our personal experiences. Then we can correct our specific defects, and strengthen our individual virtues. These individual threads enable us to home-spin our own living cloth into the overall fabric that God gives us. Ultimately this moral fabric merges into God. Most people do not “weave” this moral cloth. But Francis shows how simple and easy it is to achieve. Francis attaches magnificent advice to these meditations. He also provides a guiding theme, which we follow in the next meditation.

**Fourth Meditation: On Sin**

“Preparation: Place yourself in the presence of God. Beseech him to inspire you.

Considerations: 1) Recall to mind how long it is since you began to sin, and note how greatly sins have multiplied in your heart since that first beginning, and how every day you have increased sins against God, yourself, and your neighbor, by deed, word, desire, and thought. 2) Consider your evil inclinations, and how often you have given in to them. By these two points you will discover that your sins are more numerous than the hairs of your head, yes more than the sands of the sea, Ps 39: 13-14. 3) Consider particularly the sin of ingratitude to God, a general sin that reaches out to all the rest, and makes them infinitely more enormous. Note then how many benefits God has granted you, and how you have misused all of them against their giver. Note especially how many of his inspirations you have despised, and how many good movements you have rendered useless. Even more than all the rest, remember how many times you have received the sacraments without full benefit. What has become of those precious jewels with which your beloved spouse adorned you? All of them have been buried beneath your iniquities. With what preparation did you receive them? Think about such ingratitude. So often God has run after you to save you, and you have always fled from him in order to destroy yourself.”[[58]](#endnote-58)

Because these considerations are so harsh, and so hard on us, we want to begin deep in God’s loving heart. So first we place ourselves in the presence of Love himself. At home in God’s heart, we can face our sins, especially if we beg Him to inspire us. Without loving support from God, we would lack the courage to mention sin, much less to examine its extensive erosion of our soul. But in His gentle hand, we can be totally honest, and face sin directly. Francis asks us to recall the time of our first sin. This revolt is our tremendous transition from innocence to guilt. On the surface, our first sin was minor. What can a seven-year-old do? So we can easily dismiss our first sin. That external evaluation of the sin misses the point that Francis makes. This first sin was the first time that we preferred our decision to God’s. This violation of our unity with truth and love requires us to twist truth and resist love. How can that be?

Suppose that our first sin was a lie. By imposing a lie upon the truth, we rupture the unity of truth. Our lie does not fit the truth. If we ate the cookie, but deny it, we try to impose “We did not eat it” upon “We did eat it”. The cookie is not important, but the lie is stupendously significant. The moral lie is invisible, so we compare it to the visible ripping of a cloth. The unified moral fabric of truth no longer exists, because of our lie. When we lie we attack truth’s integrity. We insist that the lie we tell must take the place of the truth that exists. But it can’t. The lie breaks the unity of truth. If truth were a stream, our lie would disrupt its flow. Since all analogies fall short of the actual lie, we use several analogies to come at the lie from several angles, thereby expressing it more fully. So our lie curdles the unity of truth, rather like milk sours. So even if our first lie is laughably minor, we none the less attack the truth. Subsequent lies can be more harmful, even savage. Each lie rebels more against the truth because we repeat our rebellion. As we practice, so we become. Our first lie makes us liars. Our subsequent lies confirm us increasingly in our revolt against truth. We need God’s loving presence in our heart to relax us enough to admit the truth of our revolt, and rely upon God’s mercy to repent.

We also reject God’s love when we lie. At first, our rejection is minor, and easily revoked and repaired. We may recall confessing our first lie to our mother. This admission relieves us of the burden of our little revolt against truth and love. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we never lied again? That would fit God’s plan. His love leads us to truth alone, which is Him alone, because He is Truth. God is so unified that He is simply One with his Truth and His Good. Here on earth, we struggle with God’s simplicity. But we clearly see that the more truth we find, the more good we find. The more we know, the more we love. The truth reveals the goodness, which we love. When we tell our first lie, we reject truth, which we know, and reject good, which we love. By this dual rejection, we refuse to love God as He deserves. God made us to love all good, especially Goodness Himself. When we reject a small truth, we also reject a small good. When we lie for the first time our rejection is so out of order that it shocks us. Recall how much that first sin hurt. Committing it bothered us. That’s why we hurried to mother to set everything straight again. How far have we fallen from that innocence?

Francis urges us to remember our original innocence, so that we know what we want to reestablish. If we repent our first steps toward our present sinful condition, we can repent each and every sin. To commit each sin, we had to silence our conscience. We may even do our best to extinguish it entirely. Today, we hope to reverse this deadly descent into sin. Then we can improve life for ourselves and our neighbor, and thus grow in our image and likeness to God. This growth redirects our thoughts, desires, words, and deeds to heaven. This is our best effort to correct our sins, which directed all our abilities to hell. Switching eternal destinations from hell to heaven is a great relief.

Our inclinations, as Francis notes, seem to overwhelm us at times. Instead of giving in to them, we should combat all sinful tendencies. Even if these surges get the better of us frequently, as Francis recounts, we can overcome them in the long run. To do so, we admit that our sins are numerous, and we confess them all. Yes, we will remember later some that we forgot. The very process of repenting sin removes the willful blindness we impose upon ourselves by sinning. Moreover, clearing away our decisions to sin enables us to focus upon each temptation to sin as it arises. Thus we can more successfully fight temptations. Repentance also renews our concentration, dissipated by deciding to sin. Therefore, we succeed more often because we fight each temptation one-on-one. These are some of the hidden benefits which Francis provides. By contrast, if we consider our many failures without God’s loving help to confess them, we discourage ourselves. Francis considers the multitude of our sins at this time to arouse our sorrow, and increase our desire to repent. Each sin causes us personal grief, that spreads like wildfire to the neighbors we offend. By the time we add up all the misery we imposed by our sins, we have such a load, that we hurry to confession.

If we do not hasten to confess, we pile insult upon ingratitude. Francis insists that this general sin overarches all our individual sins, tainting them to become “infinitely more enormous”. Perhaps our habit of self-congratulation deceives us, so that we fail to comprehend his meaning. He highlights how refusing to follow Christ’s redemptive lead into confession removes His mercy. We don’t allow Jesus to wash our sins away. If we were properly grateful, we would rejoice that Christ saves us from sin by taking them upon His innocent self. Ideally we would be so grateful for our created goodness that we would not even consider sin. As it is, after repentance from our sins, we would be so grateful that Jesus takes them away, that we would not even think of sinning again. Instead, we repeat our relapses into sin.

Francis describes some of these failures in vivid terms. His descriptions fit us well. Therefore, they help us arouse proper sorrow for our sins. Then we can cast off the chains of sin by confessing them. With that freedom, we can devote ourselves to good deeds instead of to sins. The sacraments of confession and Eucharist are God’s way for us to escape sin and nourish ourselves. Good confessions apply Christ’s redemptive merits to eliminate our sins. More memorably we can say that Jesus pours His blood over us, to wash our sins away. This confessing sacrament cleanses us, so that we can worthily receive Christ in the Eucharistic sacrament. By receiving Jesus, we nourish our divine life, given in Baptism. We must remind ourselves often that God adopts us into His family, treating us as His beloved children. He gives us His own life, so that we live partially just as He lives completely. By rejecting our sins, purging them in confession, we prepare to accept Christ Himself in the Eucharist. When He comes into our heart, He nourishes us for the journey home to God. Reminding ourselves of these blessings helps us to appreciate them, and be properly grateful. These strands compose the fabric of our life in the Church. In confession, Jesus reweaves the rips in our life, making us whole again.

“Affections and resolutions. 1) Be utterly confounded by your misery: O my God, do I dare to stand before your eyes? Alas, I am only the corruption of the world, and a sink of ingratitude and iniquity. Is it possible that I have been faithless, that I have left neither a single sense, nor one of my mental abilities, uncorrupted, unviolated, and undefiled? Not even a single day of my life has passed without evil deeds. Should I thus repay the benefits given me by my Creator, and by my Redeemer’s Blood? 2) Ask pardon, and, like the prodigal son, like Magdalen, like the woman taken in adultery, cast yourself at the feet of the Lord: Have mercy, Lord, upon this sinful creature. Alas, O living fountain of compassion, have pity on this miserable wretch. 3) Resolve to live a better life: No, Lord, nevermore, with the help of your grace, no, nevermore will I abandon myself to sin. Alas, I have loved it too much. I detest sin, and I embrace you, the Father of mercy. In you I wish to live and die. 4) To wipe out my past sins, I will bravely accuse myself of them, and I will not leave one of them without driving it out. 5) I will do all that I can to root out completely what is planted in my heart, particularly [be specific] that have most troubled me. 6) To do this I will unfailingly embrace the means that I have been counselled to adopt, knowing that I have never done enough to repair such grievous faults.”[[59]](#endnote-59)

Perhaps this plea is more passionate than we like. But it fits the goodness of God’s gifts and the evil of our sins. If God’s gifts were limited to creating us, then our sins would be more than enough to justify these lamentations. But God’s gifts extend to coming down to be with us by incarnating. Moreover, He died on the cross for our sins. He resurrected to show us our destiny. These luminous gifts so far surpass us that we stagger when we consider them. In their light, how could we sin at all? With the reality of God’s gifts in mind, we understand how Francis can be so profoundly sorry for his sins. No wonder that he sees himself as “a sink of ingratitude and iniquity”. These simple reflections are so accurate that they inspire our confidence. If we let this light shine upon our sins, we share the same sorrow.

So we hasten to ask pardon. We learn from famous penitents how merciful Jesus is. He reveals, in finite observable acts, the infinity of God’s mercy. Here among us, He sheds unending comforting love upon us sinners. His mercy is guaranteed. So we eagerly accept it. The impetus of sorrow for our sins accelerates us toward God. Therefore, we resolve to love and live His will. If we keep busy doing good deeds, there’s no time to sin. This emphasis on the positive should be enough to convince us. By doing what is right, we grow more orderly, more unified, more integrated, and more happy.

But there’s our negative experience as well. Our attempts to satisfy ourselves by sin dissatisfy us so much that we collapse into utter misery. We should learn from the miserable effects of sin. By sinning, we discover how detestable sin is. Sin is so evil that it demands that we detest sin. Adding the positive and negative experiences, we have every reason to repent, and no reason to sin. Instead of running away from Him by sin, we should seek our loving Savior. In Jesus we can live and die, because we enjoy His merciful love. In His love, we can face all our sins, confess each and every one, and thus root them all out of our heart. As we pray this meditation, we should specify sins which plague us. They are the ones that multiply our misery. They are the ones purge first. All we need to do is decide to revoke them. That decision cancels the choice we made to commit them. That’s all we have to do to eliminate the negative, and accentuate the positive.

Even though we can’t do enough to make up for our sins, we do our part when we revoke our sinful decision. No one else can do this for us, because no one else decided to commit our own sins. We freely sinned, so only we can freely repent. Jesus waits for our free choice, then He washes us clean with His blood, shed to pay off all sins. We do our part when we decide to revoke our previous sinful decision. Our next step is to strive toward a sinless life. Francis urges us to ask pardon at Christ’s feet. He came to remove our sins, so we give them to Him. He established the sacrament of confession to transform us from sin’s deformation into complete reformation. Repenting enables us to take the second step, to resolve to live a better life. The misery of sin ruins life. Sin is detestable, so we detest it, and resolve to live with Jesus, on the way to the Father. If we quit choosing our sin, we release all out sin into Christ’s mercy. He takes our sins away, if we agree. He repairs the destruction we imposed, if we revoke our imposition.

These considerations arouse emotions that drive us away from sin, and toward God’s mercy. We integrate these emotions into our understanding and choosing, so that our entire being strives for God in the conclusion to this meditative prayer. As Francis puts it: “Conclusion: 1) Return thanks to God who has waited for you until this hour, and has given you these good affections. 2) Offer your heart to him, so that you can put them into effect. 3) Pray that he will strengthen you to accomplish [personal items].”[[60]](#endnote-60) This conclusion solidifies our deeply personal interaction with God. Jesus relates directly to us by coming among us, dying for us, and rising to show us our destiny. His unending love and mercy encourage us to conclude as Francis does here. We see the goodness of everything that Christ did for us. Therefore we are supremely sorry for our sins, and hasten to repent, confess, and recover. Repeating this process increases our devotion.

**A Summary of the Next Five Meditations**

Francis provides another six meditations to complete his examples of God’s merciful love. The six topics he covers are: death, judgment, hell, paradise, choosing paradise, choosing the devout life. Each meditation is magnificent, but Francis offers more jewels than we can consider specifically. This summary will have to do for five of these gems. Later we will do all of his tenth meditation. It is so majestic that we must see it as he presents it. Here is a summary of the five:

The specter of death oppresses us, either directly by threatening the end of what we know best, or indirectly by denying impending doom. Somehow we know that our death is inevitable, but we do not know when it will overtake us. Our uncertainty worries us because we are not sure that we shall confess our recent sins before we die in their grasp. We are not sure that we will live God’s life when we die. We may die in our decision to reject paradise. Francis reminds us how we have preferred frivolous toys to genuine values. We often reject God for “nothing at all”. Why? Why did we tend our body so lovingly, when we are sure that it will rot? How quickly our survivors will dispose of our corpse, source of disease that it has become. Our soul will survive, for reward of punishment. Which will be our destiny?

From these considerations, we rouse our emotions to drive us toward effective resolutions. Above all, we commend our soul to God’s protection at the hour of death. Because the created world is so frivolous, we want to despise it, and focus on God’s eternal friendship. We resolve to die well by rejecting wasting ourselves on sin. We repent our decisions to sin. We conclude by thanking God for these resolutions, and beseeching Him to grant us a happy death through the merits of Jesus Christ. We implore the assistance of Our Lady and the saints. As usual, Francis echoes our fundamental experiences. He reviews our most important events, to develop our most significant decisions. We may be tangled in denying death. It’s like fear of the dark. The only way to confront our denial is to admit its effect. Denying death does not defeat death. Our wish that death did not exist does not faze death in the least. Death pays no attention to our denial.

So we must deal with death more effectively than denial does. We look for a similar fear that we have already dispelled. We overcome fear of the dark by facing it with a friend. Similarly, we can face death’s terror if we accept God’s love. Jesus is our best friend, so we can face death best with His loving help. He endured death to remove its sting. We can participate in Christ’s victory over death. This meditation helps us prepare joyfully for the climax of life in death.

Francis does not consider how death is our climax. That’s because, in his days, people died at home. Each person concluded life among family and friends. How each one died was common knowledge. By observing several people die, everyone realized that devout people die in peace, while sinful people die in agony. It was obvious to everyone that good lives produced good deaths. Physical pain might be the same for two people, but moral pain was quite different, depending upon their decision to remain sinners or to repent. Dying people often sought to resolve their lives, so it was apparent that death climaxes in some sort of resolution. Some people resolve to repent. Therefore, they ease themselves out of agony into peace. Some people resolve to rebel. Therefore, they rile themselves into more furious agony. Everyone relied upon their direct experience to see that death is the climax of life.

Beneath these observations, we recognize that people gradually emerge from foggy possibilities into clearer actualities. As we mature, we make more informed decisions. So we attain increased clarification, and improved determination. Learning more as we grow, we see God’s creation more clearly, and we decide more surely how to respond to what we see. This unfolding process increases both our awareness and our freedom. Naturally, this progress climaxes in complete comprehension and entire liberty to make our most important decision. Finally, we are ready to decide for or against God. At the moment of death, for the first time, we utterly understand our options for and against God. That comprehension perfects our freedom to decide for or against God. This is indeed our climax. At that moment, Francis wants us to be so devout that we give ourselves entirely to God. This pondering of our death is a great way to advance toward God.

Immediately following death, God judges us. Francis skips over this individual judgment. Instead, he describes the end of the world, and the general judgment that concludes the cosmos. St. John’s Book of Revelation offers fascinating symbols of this stupendous final judgment. At that moment our entire lives will be known to the entire world. All people will know all that each of us did. The world we know world will end in fire. The shadows which hid our sins shall evaporate in the light of Christ. Those who choose themselves over God at their climax, will show everyone their finalized malice. Those who choose God over themselves at their climax, will show everyone their repentance, and finalized love. Jesus, the perfectly just and merciful judge, will declare to the wicked: “Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his companions”, Mt 25:41. We sincerely hope to avoid this sentence.

Instead, we hope to hear Christ say: “Come, you blessed of my Father; possess the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”, Mt: 25:34. Francis describes this general judgment so vividly that we see it more clearly than ever before. If we imagine the final judgment this clearly, we become more real than we were before. This kind of contact with reality is the heart of prayer. Prayer is being real. Our focus on what’s happening frees us from illusions, delusions, and fantasies. These vanities too often distract us from real life. Properly focused, we devote ourselves entirely to profit from this meditation. We follow the considerations to arouse our emotions, and to conclude with good resolutions. Every step that Francis leads us through renews our life in Christ. That is another way to say that we become more devout. This renewed devotion urges us to conclude by thanking God for helping us visualize the final judgment, and our place in it. God’s love vitalizes us so that we can do penance and begin to serve more lovingly, so that we can gain heaven.

Francis next mediation is on hell. He considers damnation. His vivid descriptions of suffering grow from his personal experience of sin’s horror. His sins fracture his soul. These breaks cause throbbing suffering, sometimes fading in, and sometimes fading out. Present agony is so horrific that we gain perspective on the perfect agony that hell is. As we gather momentum through life toward the moment of full awareness and choice, our present decisions are provisionary, and the resulting pain of sin is partial. Our commitment to sin is wishy-washy during life. At the moment of complete awareness and entire freedom, during death, we confirm our decision for all eternity. That complete choice eliminates the fading in and out, the wishing and the washing. At death, we commit ourselves entirely. Entire commitment eliminates distractions. Therefore, the pains of hell are much more severe than the pains of life.

This complete rejection of God deprives us of the glints of His glory that encourage here on earth. Francis skips these abstract considerations, to concentrate on our personal experience of hell. Loss of God’s glory may be a new notion for us. We must stretch our imagination beyond our experience of God here below. He shines through His creation, even in the darkest night. On every side, we catch glimmers of His glory. But after death, when we commit ourselves totally to ourselves, we expel God from our souls. Losing Him is more painful than bodily agony. We reject Lover, and He is gone.

He is gone forever. The eternity of these sufferings is unbearable. “This eternity spawns eternal despair and infinite rage and blasphemy.”[[61]](#endnote-61) “O my soul, how can you live with this everlasting burning in this devouring fire?” Is 33:14 Francis is so honest that he admits that he deserves hell because of his many serious sins. But in God’s mercy, poured out in Christ’s blood, he can repent, avoid sin, and escape hell. As we read along with him in this meditation, we experience hell’s horrific threat. That leads us to firmly resolve to strive for heaven.

This resolve prepares directly for the next meditation: on paradise. In his colorful way, Francis paints the portrait of a magnificent night sky, a lovely sunny day, expressing all created beauty. All this fades away compared to paradise. Similarly the best of people here below fade away compared to the saints and angels in heaven. They reflect God’s glory because, at last, He is finally totally present. We enter His presence because we finally totally choose Him. From all eternity, God gives Himself from Person to Person in the Trinity. At the big bang, He gave Himself to the created universe. At the Incarnation, He gave Himself to mankind in Jesus Christ. On the cross, He gave Himself to save us from sin by suffering all sin’s effects. Through His death on the cross, He gave Himself to conquer death, and rise into the eternal glory that we now enter by giving ourselves entirely to Him.

Nothing that we have yet experienced can compare to the ecstasy of paradise. Francis describes beautiful creatures, but they can’t compare to the Creator. Paradise is the Creator, face to face with His beloved children. Such descriptions strive to express the inexpressible union that Love Himself wants with us. On this earth, we wear ourselves out straining to grasp God. In heaven, we shall effortlessly enjoy Him. On this earth, when we wear ourselves out striving toward God, we can turn to His revelation in the flesh: Jesus. He is more accessible because He became a man, like us in every significant way. If we tire ourselves considering His revelation in human form, we can turn to His mother. She refreshes our efforts when we reflect on her tender love. Similarly, we can contemplate the saints, all singing in harmony with the angels. Here below, once we tire of considering one aspect of heaven, we can refresh ourselves with another. Turning from God, to Jesus, to Mary to the saints, and to the angels, we follow Francis as he describes heavenly delights.

Then his stirring words arouse our emotions because they are well-crafted to direct our attention and desire to heaven. Once we start moving in this direction, we can resolve to strive more earnestly to achieve paradise. Many people despair of heaven because it is beyond our capacity to attain. While this is true, God lifts us past the infinite gap between us and our eternal destiny. Still, we must contribute our good will, expressed in our decisions. Step by step, we choose more and more of paradise as we lurch through life. Deciding first in one direction, then in another, we saw back and forth, never fully committed until our moment of total awareness and choice at death. But we become ever more determined by each choice. If we strive to our utmost to head toward heaven, we will probably arrive there, because of God’s mercy. Sinners that we are, we must repent daily, and confess regularly, to increase our momentum toward God. Francis boosts us up toward paradise with his ninth meditation. His tenth meditation encourages us to decide to live a devout life. We will quote it in full, because it is so inspiring.

**Tenth meditation: Choosing the Devout Life**

Francis presents his familiar preparation: put ourselves in God’s presence, and beseech his help.

“Consideration: 1) Imagine yourself in an open field, alone with your guardian angel. You see the devil seated high upon a huge throne. Many infernal spirits attend him, surrounded by a great throng of worldly people. With uncovered heads, they hail him as lord. They pay him homage, some by one sin, and some by another. Note the faces of all the unfortunate courtiers of that abominable king. See how some are furious with hatred, envy, and anger. Others are consumed with care, and burdened by worries, striving to heap up wealth. See how others are bent upon vain pursuits that bring empty and unsatisfying pleasure. Others are defiled, ruined, and putrefied by their brutish lusts. See how they are without rest, order, and decency. See how they despise one another, and make only a false show of love. In a word, there you see a commonwealth lying in ruins, and tyrannized by this accursed king. All this will move you to compassion.

“2) On the right side, you see Jesus Christ crucified. With heartfelt love, he prays for these poor tormented people, that they may be set free from such tyranny. He calls them to himself. Around him, you see a great throng of devout souls together with their guardian angels. Contemplate the beauty of this devout kingdom. How beautiful it is to see this throng of virgins, both men and women, all whiter than lilies, and this gathering of widows filled with sacred mortification and humility! See the crowded ranks of the married who live so calmly together in mutual respect, which cannot exist without great charity. See how these devout souls blend care of their exterior house to that of their interior, i.e. they integrate the love of their earthly spouse with that of the heavenly Spouse. Consider them all as a group, and see how all of them attend to our Lord in a holy, sweet, and lovely way. See how they long to place him in the center of their hearts. They are joyful, with a gracious, loving, and well-ordered joy. They love one another with a most pure and sacred love. Among these devout people, those who suffer afflictions are not over-concerned about their sufferings, and never lose courage. To conclude, look upon the eyes of the Savior who comforts them, and see how all of them together aspire to him.

“3) You have already left Satan, with his sad and wretched throng, because of the good affections you have conceived. Still, you have not yet joined Jesus the King. Nor have you enrolled in his blessed company of devout souls. Rather, you have always vacillated between the two. 4) The Blessed Virgin, together with St. Joseph, St. Louis, St. Monica, and a hundred thousand others in the ranks of those living in the world, invite you and encourage you. 5) The crucified King calls you by name: ‘Come my well-beloved, come that I may crown you’, Cant 4:8.

“Choice: 1) O world! O abominable mob. No, never shall you see me beneath your banner! I have forever abandoned your mad, fruitless ways. King of pride, accursed king, infernal spirit, I renounce you, and all your empty pomps! I detest you, and all your works. 2) I turn to you, my own Jesus, King of happiness and eternal glory, and I embrace you with all the strength of my soul. I adore you with my whole heart. I choose you to be my King now and forever. By this inviolable act of fidelity, I pay you irrevocable homage. I submit myself to your holy laws and ordinances. 3) O holy Virgin, my beloved Lady, I choose you for my guide. I put myself under your direction, and offer you unique respect and reverence. My guardian angel, please present me to this sacred assembly. Do not forsake me until I have enrolled in this blessed company. With them forever I want to say: Live Jesus! Live Jesus.”[[62]](#endnote-62)

This vivid description is a fine example of prayer that reaches out and grabs us. As we read it, we enter into reality that is invisible, but supports the visible world. Our eye of flesh will never see Satan seated on his throne. But our eye of spirit sees him ruling the miserable masses. This mire of pain is sin’s ultimate payoff. It is the opposite of each temptation, which pictures bliss, leading us into sin. This pleasant image is far from the painful truth. In reality, sin produces agony, so well described in these paragraphs. Our eye of flesh often sees glints of this clearer vision. We would see it more definitely if we watched an unrepentant sinner die. Definitively, sin defaces the sinner, leaving disordered spirit like horrifying scars. Satan offers one alternative for us to choose.

But Francis describes the other alternative, the right side. Because of Christ’s ardent love and mercy, sinners can escape from Satan. They can emerge from slavery, and enter into the freedom of the children of God. Jesus leads them into happiness, so sweet and gentle, and strong and lasting, that this description inspires us. Even on this earth, our eye of flesh can see glimpses of heavenly glory in devout people who are so joyful because they are so busy serving. All devout people urgently seek Christ, yearning for Him, for He loves us beyond measure. Devotion is a foretaste of heavenly bliss.

We stand in that field that Francis describes. We see each side. If we decide for God, we progress into peaceful happiness. It is not enough to leave Satan, and sit resting in the field. Instead, we realize that sitting between Satan and Jesus stretches us in opposite directions. This tension disrupts our health. Instead of lingering on this field of decision, we should stride confidently toward Christ. All the loving people beckon us toward paradise. The hating people try to fool us into joining them. These opposing groups are so totally different that they present a glaring choice between them.

Behind the appearances of each competing side, we find deeper differences when we examine the reasons for their competition. The loving people want us to be united in love. The hating people want us to be fragmented in hate. Why do they bother? The deeper reason for evil people is that anyone who is in any way happy it galls them. They can not stand to watch other people enjoy anything. They can’t sleep at night if other people sleep well. Satan, the source of all hate, fooled them into perverting their natural goodness. Now they writhe in self-imposed frustration. They promise themselves some relief if a good person renounces goodness to become evil. But if another sinner joins them, no relief occurs. So why do they bother to promote evil? It is because, in a twisted way, they call it success if they destroy delight in another person. They hate more by expanding their hatred to another perverted person. This inversion of delight is what they call success. None of this inverted action makes any sense. But it does make sin.

On the other side, the right side, Jesus shines Love through His incarnate body. He brings the source of all love down to our flesh. He is Love in the flesh. Therefore, He never thinks of perversion. He never inverts any good, but always expands good. His greatest redemptive accomplishment is to bring good out of the evil of our sins. If we accept his love, He heals our sins. If we release our wounds to Him, He heals them entirely. He awaits our free decision. He submits his healing to our liberating choice. He is the foundation which produces so much joy in devout souls. Everything on His side makes sense, makes beauty, and makes satisfaction. It is worth reading Francis again, to absorb his vivid words. Then these words can work wonders in our imagination. These wonders arouse our emotions, to promote our decision to answer the crucified King. He calls us by name because He loves us individually, uniquely, and utterly. Francis advances from our emotion to our decision, because our election, our choice accepts Jesus, and thus expands Love.

His words inspire us to agree with Francis, so that we choose good over evil. We abandon Satan’s lies. We quit frustrating ourselves by trying to impose vanities. We renounce all prideful attempts to dominate others. Instead, we freely accept Jesus. In His love, our strength flourishes. We adore Him whole-heartedly. He loves us so much that He paid the debt for our sins. His adjustment to our sinful wills inspires us to adjust to His perfect will. Our proper response to His perfect love is to will as He wills. This obedience makes us inviolably faithful. Christ deserves irrevocable homage. We exercise that supremely deserved homage by submitting ourselves to His holy laws.

We admit that this conversion to God is difficult. We know its difficulty because of the many times we tried and failed to repent. Therefore, we turn to our heavenly mother, our Blessed Lady, to guide us to full obedience. She reminds us of the many angels and saints who love to help us. So we can request their help. When we freely agree to cooperate with all the people who strive to help us, we advance in love’s great adventure. This advance moves us from the middle of the field over to the right, where we join Christ’s Mystical Body. Vital love energizes us so that we commit to God with all our might. Perhaps this commentary helps us to savor the words that Francis wrote for us, to impel us to become more devout. Francis was so committed to God, so holy by associating with Jesus, that his words in this magnificent meditation speed straight to our hearts. So we can read and re-read these words to renew the devotion to Christ.

Devotion develops momentum, as love increases love. Francis urges us to take advantage of this momentum to make a general confession. This practical step will further augment our love by further rejecting our sins.

**How to Make a General Confession**

“[After] these necessary meditations … proceed with a humble and confident mind to make your general confession. I ask you, don’t let fears of any sort disturb you. The scorpion that bites us is poisonous at the moment it strikes, but when reduced to oil, it is an effective remedy against its own sting. Sin is shameful only when we commit it. When it has been converted by confession and repentance, it becomes honorable and salutary. Contrition and confession are so beautiful, and have so good an odor, that they wipe away the ugliness of sin, and purify its stench. Simon the leper called Magdalen a sinner, but our Lord denied that she was one, and spoke rather of the perfumes she poured out, and of her great charity, Lk 7:34-48. If we are truly humble, Philothea, our sins will be infinitely offensive to us, since God is offended by them. But to accuse ourselves of our sins becomes sweet and pleasant, since God is thereby honored. It is a kind of relief for us to inform our physician rightly about the nature of a disease that torments us. When you kneel before your spiritual director, imagine that you are on Mount Calvary at the feet of Jesus Christ crucified, and that his Precious Blood drops down on every side, to cleanse away your iniquities. Although it is not the actual Blood of the Savior, what flows so abundantly over penitents in the confessional is the merit of his Blood. Open wide your heart to cast out your sins by confession. As fast as they come out, the precious merits of Christ’s Passion enter in, and fill it with blessings.

“Be sure to state everything with candor and sincerity, to put your conscience completely at rest. Then listen to the advice and commands of God’s minister, and say within your heart: ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant hears’, 1 Kgs 3:9. Yes, Philothea, it is God whom you hear, for he has said to his priests: ‘He who hears you hears me’, Lk 10:16. After confession make the following declaration. Since it can serve as a conclusion to all your contrition, you should meditate and reflect on it. Read it over carefully, with as much conviction as you can.”[[63]](#endnote-63)

Francis describes some of the wonders of confession. Perhaps the most marvelous result of confession is peace. Jesus established this sacrament in order to pacify our anxieties about our sins. He gives us his loving mercy without limit, so that we can do just what Francis tells us about the scorpion. These days, we no longer use scorpion oil to treat scorpion stings, but the analogical connection between the source and cure remains relevant. Scorpion oil relieves scorpion stings. But our sins sting us more than scorpions do. So we apply a kind of oil made of these sins when we acknowledge and repent them before Christ in this sacrament. At the start, we lie about our sin. It is evil, but we call it good. We insist that we are doing good when we commit this evil. To correct this lie, we must take it back when we confess it. It is a tremendous relief to re-establish basic truth. Each lie that we tell requires massive effort. We expend oceans of psychological energy to force a lie upon reality. It doesn’t fit, so we have to force it again. Wasting all that effort wears us out, and riles us up. So it is very peaceful to quit this revolt against reality by telling the truth. In addition to the lie which every sin is, there is the damage of the sin itself. Francis used an oil analogy to show that we use admissions of our sins to repent of our sins.

Mary Magdalen is a shining example of this repentance. When she charged for sex, she insisted that her action was good. After all, she had all this money to spend on precious perfume. Didn’t that prove how clever and industrious she was? Didn’t that justify prostitution? Not really. All that vanity produced misery. When she came to Jesus to repent, she admitted the truth. Simon the leper saw only her previous lie and adultery. He clearly knew about both, and he twisted the repentance into an attack on Jesus. Christ saw all her past sins. But He also saw her present repentance, flowing from love of Him. Let’s hope that Simon eventually opened his heart to accept loving mercy. Then he could repent of his many sins, especially the hypocrisy that glares at us in this incident. Then he could obtain the relief he so desperately desired.

Hidden in this process is the sinner’s personal truth. Mary Magdalen comes to know herself better by eliminating the lies promoting prostitution and hiding her from herself. Sinners often claim to know themselves very well, and to serve themselves. Then why are they so disturbed by their sins, and so anxious that people might discover how sinful they are? Instead of admitting their sins, they hide them in the darkest corners of their souls. A startling benefit of confession is relief from the burden of this self-promotion that’s really self-destruction. When we admit our sins, we clear away a set of lies we once used to deceive ourselves. Then our understanding of ourselves expands. Behind the confusing disturbances that we impose by sin sits the imposer, ourselves. What the imposer imposed he can relieve. We can renounce our impositions. We can reorder our disorders. It is even possible to know ourselves so well that we eliminate habits that plagued us for years. St. Augustine rhapsodizes about this “knowing yourself”, and the relief that sweeps over us when we repent.

Relief brings peace. When we try to maintain all those lies, and all that falsified justification for sins, we stir up profound turmoil. When we admit how sinful those decisions are, and when we repent choosing those sins, we revoke all that turmoil. Guilt weighs us down until we accept our guilt, and reject the sin which is its cause. Once we decide to correct our sinful decision, we give our guilt to Jesus. He gratefully accepts all that trash, because He came to relieve us. When we accept Christ into our hearts, to heal us of sin, we solidify our love for Him. He is Love Incarnate, so letting him into the hidden corners of our heart lets Love flow where we need it the most. Our feeble response to this infinite love helps us be more one with Jesus. This unity surpasses all other joys. Confession is therefore priceless for many reasons, but primarily for our personal relationship with Christ.

Jesus is Strength Himself. So when we accept him in His gift of the sacrament of confession, He folds us. Naturally, He strengthens us, helping us become staunchly devout. Francis doesn’t develop these dimensions of confession, but they follow from his more picturesque and poignant description. He leaves no doubt that confession is vitally important. In some way, this sacrament takes us back to Calvary, where Jesus shed His last drop of blood for love of us. The merits of that blood flush over us to wash all our confessed sins away. Francis puts these facts so poetically that we love to review this meditation. Down the ages, Francis continues to help people because of the merciful love that he pours out in these pages. His plea that we open our hearts moves us to confess with the proper dispositions, just as he describes. Then with open heart, we accept Christ’s healing mercy. Healed of sin, we accept renewed Christ-life. This divine life is often called sanctifying grace, received in Baptism, lost in mortal sin, and restored in Confession.

Francis emphasizes exactly what is necessary for genuine confession: utter sincerity. When we approach our Father with childlike candor, we open our hearts entirely to Him. Into this wide-open heart, Jesus eagerly enters. Once there, He heals our sin-sickness of all its self-induced disorder. Christ reorganizes our heart, the center of our being. Here at our very core dwells our person. Our person is who we are. Our person knows and decides. Our person sins. It’s not society, or our parents, or evil influence, who sins. We ourselves are the persons who sin. No one else is responsible. If we are totally candid, totally honest, totally humble, then we reach the source of sin. By opening ourselves all the way down to our person we can repent. The person rebelled, and must really repent. Francis reminds us to reach the origin, and repent.

Then we give ourselves totally to Jesus, the healer *par excellence*. He, and He alone, can take away our burden of sin. He, and He alone, can lift us up from the deep dust of despair. He, and He alone, can restore our divine life. He earned that right by taking all sin upon His innocent self, to pay its total debt. He delegates this ability to a visible vicar, the priest who listens for Christ, and who absolves in His name. In this way, the priest takes His place. Therefore, we listen carefully to what Jesus says through His representative in the holy sacrament of Confession. Once cleansed, we resolve to serve God sinless-ly. This is exactly what Francis recommends in the declaration that he provides next.

**An Authentic Declaration to Impress on the Soul Its Resolution to Serve God, and to Conclude Confession**

“I, the undersigned, standing in the presence of the eternal God, and of the whole heavenly court, having considered the immense mercy of his divine goodness toward me, a most unworthy and wretched creature, whom he has created out of nothing, preserved, supported, delivered from so many dangers, and loaded with so many benefits, and considering above all the incomprehensible sweetness and mercy with which this most good God has so graciously borne with me in my iniquities, so frequently and so lovingly inspired and urged me to amendment,…”[[64]](#endnote-64)

Francis composed this declaration in his finest legal language. So it is a magnificent document. Its very magnificence makes it hard to read, as these first few lines indicate. Instead of quoting this involved legal document, we review its main points. Above all, it is a clarion call to wake us up, to strengthen our resolution to serve God, and to highlight the ultimate benefits of Christ’s sacrament of Confession. That’s why Francis emphasizes the person: “I, the undersigned”. It is the person who sinned. It is the person, and he alone, who must reverse his decision. From sinner, he reverts to repent-er (penitent), and returns to God’s life. He cannot do this alone. Instead, he must rely upon the power of the eternal God, present by His love. God has more than enough power to support the penitent’s return. But the repentant sinner is so weak that he needs to supplement his Creator’s support with creatures’ support. That’s why Francis invokes the heavenly court. Thus propped up by the victorious community of loving souls, the penitent acknowledges his utter weakness, and his profound need for God’s mercy. Fortunately, God’s mercy is immense, equal to His infinite Goodness. The penitent, crushed by the reality of his sins, must reassure himself by striving to conceive of God’s infinite mercy. Without this reassurance, the sinner sinks into despair. With this salutary reassurance from God our loving Creator, expresses in creatures who have won through to heaven, the penitent proceeds into God’s infinite mercy, even though he is utterly unworthy and wretched.

This declaration is so foreign to our usual views that we should pause to assess it. Are we really that bad? Do we really need to beg God’s mercy? Will He withhold it until we prostrate ourselves at His feet to beg for it? Shouldn’t we instead promote ourselves in the sight of God and men? The answers to these questions are: yes, yes, yes, and no. Because God is infinitely good, each sin against Him in an infinite offense. We who are finite cannot do anything infinite. But we can, and regularly do, commit finite sins against infinite God. Thereby, our finite offence is an insult to God’s infinity. It is God’s infinity that promotes our sin from finite act to infinite offense. Thereby, we disorder reality beyond our capacity to re-order it. That’s why God the Son becomes man in Jesus Christ. He applies God’s infinite power to re-order this infinite disorder. Compared to the infinities involved, we are vanishingly small. This truth urges us to admit our wretchedness. That’s the negative side of this reality. The positive side is God’s infinite mercy that takes our sins upon His innocent Self. By paying sin’s debt of death, Jesus unites infinite mercy with infinite justice. This infinite redemption should evoke our absolute awe. Francis conveys this awe in the first words of his declaration.

After listing many of God’s impressive gifts to us, Francis notes our failure to thank Him. What an offense this is to His incomprehensible sweetness and mercy. Though we do not comprehend God’s infinite sweetness, we enjoy accepting it. When we accept His mercy, we relax, and begin to gaze lovingly at His surpassing mercy. This gazing is meditation or contemplation. To contemplate His sweetness more intensely, we review the visible gifts He provides. They radiate from his infinite mercy, to enrich us. Because His sweet mercy so attracts us, and because we need it so desperately, we should run to Him. Francis reminds us that we delay instead. We dawdle, distracted by creatures we thought would take God’s place in our hearts. Often they are so insignificant that we can’t even remember them. All we remember is immersing ourselves in some creature for hours, maybe days, even years, while God waits patiently. Francis reveals our behavior all too perfectly. Merely admitting this truth solves half of our sin. So this declaration is a springboard toward honesty.

This summary of the first part was rather detailed. The following summary of the rest of this declaration is shorter. Honestly, we ignore God’s innumerable gifts. We do not even thank Him for them. Thus we shame ourselves by committing the sin of ingratitude. By deciding to ignore God’s gifts, we profane our soul. This means that we drag our soul down from its image and likeness to God. We turn our soul against God. These are horrifying sins. When we admit them, we understand ourselves more completely, because we see our revolt. We see how we waste God’s gifts. In this light of truth we can resolve our revolt. Unless we learn how we twist our soul, we can’t untwist it. God respects our freedom so much that He waits until we decide to repent. Then he supports our repentance, forgives our sins, and restores His life in us. Our declaration affirms these gifts, and states our free choice to repent. Clearly, we must do our part, to accept God’s more powerful part of salvation from sin. An analogy for this process is: we ask Him, and He bulldozes our sins away.

Francis shows that we commit treason against God when we betray Him by twisting our soul. Every sin distorts our image of God into an image of ourselves. When we repent, we stop twisting, and God restores our proper shape. To restore our native likeness to God, Jesus pays the wage of sin: He suffers and dies. In this way, we are guilty of the passion and death of Christ. When we learn this basic truth, we hasten to return toward God. We rely upon His infinite mercy. We beg God to absolve us from our crimes. Christ is the only foundation for our hope of salvation. So we renew our Baptismal promises to renounce Satan, his works and pomps, in order to follow Jesus. Francis is so poetic here that I quote him: “To this end I give and consecrate to him my mind with all its faculties, my soul with all its powers, my heart with all its affections, and my body with all its senses. I insist that I will never again abuse any part of my being by revolting against his divine will and sovereign majesty, to which I sacrifice and immolate myself in spirit, so as to be forever his loyal, obedient, and faithful creature, without any intention ever to revoke this resolution, or to repent of it.”[[65]](#endnote-65)

We hear him proclaim his resolution to untwist his soul, so that he can use it as God intended. He lists some of his abilities, and gives them totally, as the Hebrews once immolated lambs in total holocaust. Francis immolates himself in spirit, giving everything to be forever faithful. The sacrament of Confession works in proportion to our commitment. If we intend to do God’s will entirely, He forgives us entirely. If we hold back, then we refuse to give God all the pieces of our broken heart. The piece we hold back is missing. Notice how important this is. We intentionally hold back a piece of our broken heart. That makes it impossible for God to mend it. Yes, He really respects our freedom that much. By Christ’s sacrament of Confession, we come to know ourselves more as God knows us. We come to know how important our free choice is to God. Then we can begin to respect ourselves more like God respects us. In this sense, Augustine came to know himself in Christ. We are not rats racing. We are God’s beloved. Francis urges us to realize our value.

Part of learning who we are is admitting our tendency to sin. We can be entirely given to God during confession on Saturday, but betray Him on Sunday. Francis knows that we fall. He does not fantasize that we will remain upright in God’s sight. But he asks us to determine to rise again, as the next section of the declaration proclaims. He suggests that we swear to rise every time we dump ourselves down. We should “come to ourselves” by realizing that our sins fool us, and shroud our real person behind our hand-made fake. We should call all the heavenly witnesses to behold our commitment. By sacrificing our heart, which represents our entire being, we conclude this sincere declaration. Francis hopes that if we read it, we will agree with it. We will add personal items to this general declaration, and we will increasingly commit ourselves to the good results mentioned there. Perhaps the first time we read it, we disagree with some of its points. But as we clear the smoke of sin away, we recognize more and more truth in this passionate declaration. See appendix A for all of it.

We notice how passionate Francis is, so we can imagine how he fascinated and impressed everyone. His personal blend of fascinating friendship and profound passion carried him to the heights of sanctity. There must be personal effort, often excruciating, to cooperate with Christ on the way to God. But the Holy Spirit does all the heavy lifting. Just as Jesus said, He sent His Spirit to breathe divine life into the Church, into each and every follower of Christ. It’s up to us to determine what to do with this spiritual breath. Francis obviously accepted it, inhaled it, and exhaled it, in God’s own rhythm. Therefore, he breathed freely. On our way into devout life, we cough, sputter, and stutter, while we try to accept God’s rhythm. So we must confess our sins, and strive to follow Jesus ever more closely.

Jesus provides divine help. Christ teaches us God’s inner secret: there are three Persons in One God. The Father is most famous for creating us, and leading His chosen people through their hardships to the fullness of time. At the peak of that fullness, Jesus becomes man to reveal God the Son. During three years of public ministry, Christ teaches us the Trinity of Love. Infinite Love, poured forth in Jesus, urges us to worship the Divine Three. After Christ dies to pay sin’s debt, and rises to proclaim His glory, He sends His Spirit, the Holy Spirit of Love and union. Pentecost is the occasion when the Spirit flowed freely. Subsequently, we live in the age of the Spirit, unfolding in the Church. Struggling to grow in Christ by obeying the Spirit’s urge, we work out our salvation in fear and trembling, Php 2:12. As we strive to purge sin, and gain heaven, we cooperate with the Spirit as best we can. He helps us more than we understand, and prepares for the second coming of Jesus. Francis prepares us to live well in this age by purging ourselves of sin. He concludes:

**Conclusion Drawn from This First Purgation**

“After this protestation has been made, attend carefully, and open your heart’s ears to hear in spirit the words of absolution which the same Savior of your soul, seated on the throne of his mercy on high in heaven, will pronounce before all the angels and saints, at the same instant as the priest, in his name, absolves you here below on earth. Then all this company of the blessed will rejoice in your happiness. With incomparable joy, they will sing a spiritual canticle, and all of them will give the kiss of peace and fellowship to your heart, now restored to grace and sanctity.

“By God’s mercy, Philothea, how wonderful is this contract whereby you have made a blissful treaty with the Divine majesty! When you give yourself to him, you win both him and yourself for eternal life. Hence nothing further remains but to take pen in hand, and with a sincere heart, sign your act of protestation. Then approach the altar where God in turn will sign and seal your absolution, and the promise he makes to you of his paradise. In his sacrament, he will put himself as a seal and sacred signet upon your heart, now made new again. In this way, Philothea, your soul will be purged from sin and from all affection for sin.

“Yet such affections easily spring up again in the soul, because of our infirmity and concupiscence, which may be mortified, but will never die, as long as we live here upon earth. I will therefore give you certain instructions which, if carefully observed, will preserve you so effectively from mortal sin, and all affection for it, that it will never again find a place in your heart. In order that these same instructions may contribute to a still more perfect purification, before I give them to you, I will say something about that absolute purity to which I wish to lead you.”[[66]](#endnote-66)

Francis is thrilled that confession restores God’s life to us when we confess mortal sins. What could be more exciting than resurrecting Christ-life at the center of our being? Francis calls our center our heart. Heart is much more endearing than center. We don’t need that abstract word, when we can use “heart”. But it may help to remind ourselves that the “heart” is our command center. It is our person, our self who knows and decides. This spiritual center knows all that we know by something like “hearing”. So we open the ears of our heart to listen to the most important truths that God sends. When we hear the priest absolve us, we know that Jesus says exactly the same from His heavenly judgment seat. His spiritual actions are invisible, so we use images like His heavenly throne, and the angels and saints. We do our best when we imagine these pictures. They correspond to the spiritual agreement that radiates from our confession all the way to Christ’s eternal throne. Our action is the observable part of our decision to repent of our sins. It is precisely the part that we need to become complete. Because we are spirited flesh, our flesh participates in our spiritual decision to repent. Our flesh participates by going to the place, kneeling down, speaking, making the sign of the cross, etc.

This account describes a magnificent unity of body and soul. We are God’s masterpiece, even though it is popular to ignore the splendor of our incarnate spirits. If we realize how wonderful we are, we can fly free of our oppressors. They do their best to sink us into matter, to make us consumer slaves. Too often, we buy what they tell us to buy, especially on credit. That’s how they keep us enslaves, for their ongoing profit. Often, we purchase things we neither need nor want, and wonder why. Our masters crack the whip, and we shop. In varying degrees, slave-masters command our obedience. If we knew how marvelous God has made us to be, we would not submit to this slavery. Instead, we would escape the strangling chains of anxiety. We would reject our masters, and their vicious domination. We would break free. Francis delights in showing us exactly how to escape. First we break the chains of mortal sin. Then we reject affection for sin. Then we repent of our minor sins, until we gradually agree more with Jesus. He smooths the way for us by coming to us. Here on earth He takes our sins away. Christ simplifies this process by giving us the sacrament of confession.

All we need to do is to renounce our previous decision to sin. We renounce it by confessing our sins, and expressing our sorrow for them, with a firm determination to avoid them in the future. Our words symbolize our sins. Jesus extends our symbols into realities. That’s why the sacrament achieves what it symbolizes. Christ’s divine power transforms our symbolic action into real action. The more we want to wash out those sins, the more Jesus washes them out. He has the power to eliminate sins, gained by suffering sin’s penalty of death. Dying on the cross for us, He bleaches us white as snow, even if we had been scarlet with sin. But He won’t do it without our cooperation. We must agree to undo our sins by deciding against them. If we do, then Christ enters our heart. So to speak, we must open the door of our heart. When we do, Jesus enters to wash us clean. Because our sins were our decisions, we must decide against them. Then we have done our part, and Christ will clean up the mess.

No wonder that Francis is delighted with confession. No wonder that he emphasizes it so much. No wonder he paints such a lovely picture of Jesus ruling from His throne. Confession is all of this loving agreement and more. So our delight overflows into such a celebration for uniting our decisions with Christ’s decisions. As soon as we repent, Jesus cleanses us of all the sins we confess. Christ taught us to reverse our decisions when He urged us to seek the Kingdom of God. When we confess, Francis says that all the “company of the blessed will rejoice in our happiness.” That is the key to confession. Each of us who confesses throws away sins’ burdens, rejoices to escape those self-imposed chains. God and the heavenly company are so glad for our gladness that they rejoice in our happiness. This unity is the reality of love; this is its invaluable power. Lover and beloved unite. What is good for one is good for another. When one rejoices, the other rejoices. Because all the blessed love us, they are overjoyed when we are. Their joy feeds back to delight us. Joy spirals up and out by this mutual reinforcement. In Confession, lovers meet, to enjoy each other’s company and improvement.

Perhaps we have not enjoyed this experience. It is a sad fact that confession has almost disappeared in many parishes. So we may have to stretch our memory back a few years to recall the great joy that we observed in people at confession. Before they decided to confess, sins dragged them down. After, they rejoiced. Though neither their depression nor their joy was exaggerated in the Hollywood fashion, each condition was obvious. Younger people may never have seen this “before and after”. So they may need to discover it for themselves. It is well worth observing, and even more valuable to experience personally. The urgent reason why so many people go to weekly confession is their direct experience of relief from sins, followed by their advance to closer union with Jesus. We do not hear the heavenly choirs swell in joyful song, but something similar happens. We know this because we experience love’s unifying process. Francis reminds us of the joy of repenting in the way that Jesus arranged His sacrament of Confession.

The huge advantage of this sacrament is living God’s life again, regaining His love after rejecting it by mortal sin. But minor sins, like wounds, bother us until we confess them. As Pope Francis says, the Church is a field hospital. It’s where the wounded get first aid. Because Christ is the perfect physician, He heals all illness, large of small. He cures us directly in confession. That’s why Francis de Sales urges us to sign the contract he recommends. It is “a blissful treaty”. It symbolizes the end of the war we declared and waged against God’s love. Sin is quite like war because we decide to destroy either all or part of our divine life. If we reject our old war-like sins, and sign this treaty, we rejoice in reestablished peace. We delight in unifying former enemies into mutual love.

God is the other signatory. We can rely upon Him to sign because He initiates the entire process of curing sin. He dies on the cross to cleanse us, in the person of His divine Son. He agrees to sign this treaty with the full spiritual force of Love Himself. Since we can’t see His spiritual act, we picture it as signing a treaty. His mercy encourages us to sign also. After all our destruction of the life God gave us, we win ourselves back from sin. We sail straight away from the whirlpool of uncontrolled desire. We win God, Whom we truly desire, back from our lying desire for some creature. We reunite with Him, and we pledge to stay united for all eternity. Continued efforts to repent our sins increasingly purge them from our heart. As we abandon sin and affection for it, we enter eternal bliss. Nothing less satisfies us. God made us for eternal delight in His Divine Majesty, infinitely Good, infinitely True, and infinitely Beautiful.

Francis reminds us that we are likely to sin again. As long as we are on earth, we endure trials. We strive to pass the test: who do we love? Do we really love God above all? Do we demonstrate this complete love by loving our neighbors? However much we purge ourselves, we remain somewhat tainted as long as we breathe. Francis will show us how to keep so busy purging and serving, that we will reverse our direction and momentum toward creatures. After we convert, we move toward our Creator whole-heartedly. To enter our Creator’s presence, we must be absolutely pure.

**We Must Purify Ourselves of Affection for Venial Sin**

“As the day breaks, we see more clearly in a mirror spots and stains on our faces. So also as the inward light of the Holy spirit brightens our consciences, we more clearly and distinctly see the sins, inclinations, and imperfections that can keep us from attaining true devotion. The same light that enables us to see such defects and blemishes, inflames us with a desire to cleanse and purify ourselves of them.

“You will find, my dear Philothea, that in addition to mortal sins and affections for mortal sins, from which you have been purified by the foregoing exercises…, there still remains in your soul various inclinations and affections for venial sins. I do not say that you will find venial sins there, but I say that you will discover affections and inclinations to them. The second fact is very different from the first. We can never be completely free of venial sins, at least so as to continue for long in such purity, yet we can avoid all affection for venial sins. Surely it is one thing to tell a lie now and then, as a joke, in something of no importance, and another thing to like lying, and to have an affection for that kind of sin.

“We must purge the soul of every affection for venial sin. That is to say, we must not voluntarily nourish a desire to continue to persevere in venial sin of any kind. It would be an extremely base thing to wish deliberately to retain in our heart anything so displeasing to God as a will to offend him. No matter how small it is, a venial sin offends God. It does not offend him so much that he wills to damn or destroy us. But since venial sin offends him, any will and affection we have for venial sin is simply a resolution to be willing to offend his Divine Majesty. Is it in fact possible for a generous soul not only to be willing to offend God, but even to have an affection for offending him?

“Philothea, such affections are directly contrary to devotion, just as affections for mortal sin are directly contrary to charity. They weaken the powers of our spirit, stand in the way of God’s consolations, and open the door to temptation. Although they do not kill the soul, they make it extremely ill. ‘Dying flies, destroy, spoil, and damage the sweetness of the ointment’, Sir 10:11. Flies that do not stay in the ointment, but eat some of it, spoil only what they take, and leave the rest untouched. But those that die in the ointment … make it disgusting to us. In like manner, venial sins that enter into a devout soul, but do not stay there for long, do it no great damage. But if those same sins remain in the soul, because of some affection it has for them, they undoubtedly cause it to lose the sweetness of its ointment, i.e. holy devotion.

“Spiders do not kill bees, but spoil and corrupt their honey by tangling the honeycombs with their webs, so that the bees cannot do their work. … In like manner, venial sins do not kill the soul, but spoil its devotion, and so entangle its powers in bad habits and inclinations, that it can no longer exert the prompt charity that constitutes devotion. This must also be understood of times when venial sin continues to dwell in our soul by an affection we have for it. Philothea, it is not a matter of any great moment to tell a little lie, or to fall into some slight irregularity in words, actions, looks, dress, jokes, games, or dances, provided that as soon as these spiritual spiders have entered our conscience, we chase them away, and banish them, as bees do real spiders. If we let them remain in our hearts, [or worse] permit our desires to retain and multiply them, we shall soon find our honey ruined, and the hive that is our conscience corrupted and ruined. I ask once more: what likelihood is there that a generous soul should be pleased to displease God? [Can he] agree to disagree with God, or will against his will? Can he do what he knows will offend God?”[[67]](#endnote-67)

In his delightful way, Francis provides visible examples of our invisible choices. Taking our spirited flesh into full account, Francis provides ingenious observable events that relate in the same way that unobservable venial sins relate to our devout life. His shining examples show how observant he was, and how busy he was comparing visible events to invisible spiritual realities. Obviously, daylight reveals facial spots more clearly than dawn-light. This simple event relates perfectly to increased spiritual light, or discernment, that the Holy Spirit sheds upon us if we invite Him. That “light” shines into the darkness that we impose upon ourselves when we decide to sin. Each of our sins is a specific rejection of God’s light. For example, if we decide to lie, we reject God’s light of truth. Repeated rejections darken our mind. Francis finds the cause of this darkness. It is our affection for sin.

Affection for something means attraction to it. Our affection for our mother draws us to her. We love to be with her, and strive to join her when we can. Obviously, mom deserves our affection. But we can manufacture affection for sin, which does not deserve our attraction. By sinning, we direct our affection to something unworthy of our attention. This decision twists us out of shape. This misdirection of our affection bends our attraction away from good things toward evil things. This expression sounds as though things can be evil. We fall into the habit of calling things evil. But actually nothing is evil. Instead, all things are good, because they are God’s creatures. Evil is the absence of good. It’s like the missing money after the thief took it. The money was, is, and will be good. The evil in the theft-event is that money we used to possess is no longer ours. The good money is now in the thief’s possession. But we should have it. The evil is the lack.

Thinking this way is so different from what we usually do that we must exert ourselves. If we make that effort, we see more clearly what Francis is saying. He shows us that evil claims to be something, but is nothing in itself. The good that it spoils exists. The spoiling does not exist. And yet, something happens. If we clarify what happens, we can better pursue good and avoid evil. That’s why Francis gives us the example of darkness. There is no darkness. There is only lack of light. Light is the existing being. To speak conveniently, we say that light dispels darkness. But there is nothing there to dispel. Darkness is merely the absence of light. When the sun rises, light shines upon objects, allowing us to see even the spots on our face. Sunlight is a familiar reality that we can use to familiarize ourselves with unfamiliar spiritual things like choices. We use visible examples to clarify our invisible moral choices. We want to improve our morality, purge venial sins, destroy our desire for them, and become more devout.

Already we realize that mortal sin kills God’s life in us. So we repent all our mortal sins. We can liken that moral purge to getting rid of sins. But sins are evil, so they are not positive at all. They are negative. They lack being. They are like the missing button on our shirt. Something is wrong; we can’t button the shirt. But there is nothing positive there which prevents us from fastening it. Instead, there is something missing. This is the key to evil: it is not positive; it is negative. However, the negation makes a difference. That’s why we often confuse evil with some existing being. Francis gives us examples of negations, to help us tell the difference between positive and negative effects. With a bit of effort, we can recognize the reality of negation. Then we can save ourselves from many mistakes. For example, we can avoid the mistake of returning evil for evil. Once we know that evil is the absence of good, we see that God cures evil by pouring in good. This is the secret of His death on the cross. He poured infinite good into the evil done to him by men and by Satan. The good He poured into the absence of good, filled the universe to the brim. To imitate Christ is to repay evil with good. If we emphasize the positive good as Jesus did, we become devout.

To emphasize this dynamic, we can say it with different words. God cured hatred by filling its absence of love with His infinite love. Each creature, from Satan to humans, can use his freedom to reject some good, to prevent it from unfolding, or to take it away. This absence of love is a form of hatred. Jesus cures all hatred by shedding His infinite love upon all negations. That positive love fills in all the gaps, or hatreds, which we call sin. This expresses the dynamism of redemption. Christ redeems by filling in the love that is missing. The word “hate” is a noun. Most nouns stand for something. But this noun stands for a negation: the lack of love. Jesus eliminates hatred by filling all emptiness with love.

Each of us somehow knows this dynamic. The super-activity of God in Jesus shines so brightly that we can’t avoid it. His love touches all hearts. Francis delights in God’s love, and strives to help us delight ever more. To activate our loving response, we should express what we know about Christ in our own words. As we do that, we recognize how excellent the words that Francis uses are. Then we move from his words into the meanings that he lives. All spiritual meanings and values are invisible, because they are too active to be trapped in visible limits. Francis knows that so clearly that he gives homey visible examples which are tiny imitations of the activity that bursts through visible walls.

He tells us the difference between committing venial sins and loving venial sins. We commit them often by accident, in the rush of life. But we hate committing them. Then we become remorseful, and resolve to avoid them. Nonetheless, we commit more of them. Weakness and habit certainly contribute to committing more venial sins. The only thing under our control is affection for those sins. If we misplace our love because we desire them, our love will lead us to commit more and more. We may become addicted to them, as many people are today. These innumerable addictions range from relatively innocuous to mortal. Francis shows that we must eliminate them all, lest they become mortal.

At the base of our love for venial sins, Francis finds two opposing wills. We love venial sin because we are willing to oppose God’s will. Are we pleased to displease God? Do we desire to reject His desires? Whichever way we say it, affection for sin is misplaced love. We put that love in the right place when we love God instead of sin.

Sin shocks us, because it is so against nature. Somehow we know that sin is unnatural. Sin is contrary to the good that we attack when we sin. When we are embarrassed by this attack, we have two options. Rather than straighten out this twist, we can tell lots of lies about sin. For example, we lie when we say that sin is merely doing what comes naturally. We lie when we claim that we are incorrigible sinners. We lie when we insist that nothing we can do will eliminate venial sin. We lie when we deny all possible cures for sin. All lies like these discourage us. Francis shines the light of Truth into this darkness. He distinguishes between continuing to commit venial sins and wanting to commit them. We will continue to commit them until we die. But we should never love to commit them. We should never place our affections in them. That is within our power to correct. Repentance is our second, and preferred, option. If we repent, we can treat sins like flies. We can chase them away, without wasting efforts to destroy them all. Above all, we never decide to love the flies.

Francis develops this image by explaining the quote from Sirach 10:11. Like venial sins, some flies take a mouthful of honey with them when they go. Though some good is missing, they take a negligible amount. We can live with this small loss. But dead flies in the honey ruin all of it. That disgusts us. By this visible example, Francis focuses our attention upon the invisible difference between sin and loving sin. The flies that fly away spoil only the honey they take. We don’t want to ignore that damage, but we want to see it in perspective. Venial sins will occur, and we want to repent them. But we never want to love them. If we love them, we keep them in our heart, like flies in the ointment (honey). If we harbor the flies in the honey, we sour its sweetness, and disgust ourselves. On the spiritual side of that analogy, if we love sins, we sour our holy devotion. Francis seamlessly weaves these revealing pictures into a unity that helps us understand invisible reality. We’re glad for his help. He graciously provides yet another clarifying example.

He had seen spider webs in bee hives, and noticed that the spiders did not eat the bees directly. Instead, the spiders spoiled the bees’ work. Good teacher that he is, Francis uses that fine picture to represent our invisible decision to love a venial sin. The spider-web of this false love represents the confusion woven, and the sticky errors that spread out when we impose love for sin. This love won’t fit. It can’t fit, because we try to love something that is missing. Remember that sin, like all evil, is the absence of the good that should be there. We frustrate ourselves because we try to impose the impossible when we love sin. With the spread of this web of lies, we entangle our actions, misdirecting our abilities into impossible entanglements that interfere with each other. So we gradually wear ourselves out, and cease to function.

Our single decision to love our lie corrupts our other decisions. If we lie that we have earned some money, when we have not, we can’t rest until we correct this lie. But if we bestow our love upon that lie, then we must tell other lies to protect it. Perhaps we invent work we did to earn this non-existent money. Then we have to lie about when we did that work. We have to lie about where we were when we did that work. We have to lie to the people who saw us at the place where we actually were. There is no end to the lies we must tell to prop up the lie that we insist upon imposing. Like a spider’s web, it entangles, ensnares, and disables.

That’s why Francis insists that we must eliminate all our love of that lie. Our decision to love our lie dresses that lie up in pleasing plumage. If we do purge our love of that lie, then its ugly self pops out from behind that distracting plumage. In this view, when we see its emptiness, we want to stop imposing our lie. If we purge our love for it, we want to fill up its gap with truth. This decision heals the hole in truth that we blasted. By venial sins, we may poke other holes in truth, but if we do not love them, they will not increase, like the spider’s web in the beehive. I we repent of that lie, and refuse to love it, truth replaces the vacuum we imposed by our lie. All that language is too abstract, so Francis says chase these spiders away, banish them as soon as we see them. This is a clear way to say that we desire to eliminate affection for sin. If we skip the details, and use the spider-web image, most people get the point. The relationship of the invisible to the visible is close enough that we can use this analogy to better grasp the meaning of moral life. We can become more devout without abstract reasoning. This increased devotion is all that counts. In visible terms: save our honey. Then we will be pleased to please God. We will agree to be agreeable to Him, and will will what He wills. This unity is our destiny. It is the deepest devotion. The devout life is the life of love for God. Necessarily that love is pure, purged of all sinful acts, and even of desire for sin. Francis now shows how to take the next steps to purify ourselves.

**We Must Purify Ourselves of Affection for Useless and Dangerous Things**

“Sports, banquets, parties, fine clothes, theater… are by no means evil. They are indifferent acts, and therefore they can be either good or bad. At the same time, such things are always dangerous, and affection for them is still more dangerous. …although it is licit to engage in… [them], it is opposed to devotion, therefore extremely harmful and dangerous. It is not evil to do such things, but it is evil to be attached to them. It is a pity to sow such vain and foolish affections in our heart. They usurp the place of worthwhile interests, and hinder the sap of our soul from doing good.

“The ancient Nazarenes abstained not only from alcohol, but also from grapes, both sweet and bitter, Num 6:3. This was not because such grapes could intoxicate them, but because there was danger that eating sour grapes would arouse an appetite for fresh grapes, and eating them would arouse an appetite for wine. I do not hold that we can never use these dangerous things, but I say that we can never set our affections on them without damage to devotion. When stags have put on too much weight, they scatter, and hide in thickets. They know that fat slows them down so that they cannot run if they are pursued. So also, when man’s heart is burdened with these useless, superfluous, and dangerous affections, it certainly cannot run quickly, lightly, and easily after God, the true end of the devout life. Children amuse themselves by eagerly running after butterflies, and, because they are children, no one finds fault with them. But is it not ridiculous, or rather lamentable, to see mature men set their hearts and affections on such worthless trifles as the things I have named, things that are not only useless, but put us in peril of becoming irregular and undisciplined in our pursuit of them? For such reasons, my dear Philothea, I say that we must purge ourselves of these affections. Although such acts are not always opposed to devotion, the affections are always damaging to it.”[[68]](#endnote-68)

Outstanding soul-doctor that he is, Francis knows that we don’t suddenly start acting like Hitler. Instead, we misplace our love on some small thing, in itself good, and try to milk it for all the satisfaction we can extort. We are really searching for the satisfaction that only God can provide. The sports addict is a fine example. He let a small mistake of overindulging in sports grow into an overriding passion for basketball. Actually, basketball isn’t good enough for all that devotion. The examples that Francis gives fit our experience. We know people passionate to consume food. We know party animals. We know vain people, addicted to clothes. Theater-lovers also fall off the edge of reality. All these addicts overemphasize a small good. They try to make it into Good Himself. So Francis distinguishes between proper love and improper love. Proper love is proportional to the good of the beloved thing. Improper love exaggerates beyond the beloved thing’s value. Aren’t we better off for learning what’s wrong with this exaggerated love?

We make these inoffensive things offensive by loving them too much. We decide to make these innocuous things noxious. By devoting more love to them than they deserve, we idolize these indifferent things. An idol represents a fake God. So we idolize a creature if we lie that it is as good as our Creator. This lie twists our soul out of shape, so it’s very harmful. That’s why all creatures are potentially dangerous. We can idolize any of them. Some of them are easier to idolize than others, as watching basketball is more likely to become an obsession than swatting flies. Over-attachment to any creature is dangerous. If we fix ourselves upon it as if it were God, then we abuse it and ourselves. We also offend God by misusing a gift he gave us. The key to comprehension is to examine what we love, and how much we love it. What desire has flamed up so that we give the devotion due to God to a mere creature? In the list of commandments God gave to Moses, forbidding idolatry is first because it is so seductive. See Deut 12:2-3 for God’s anger against false gods.

Devotion to some creature instead of to God is vain and foolish because it usurps God’s place. Idolatry unjustly takes the place of God. He alone is worthy of adoration, because He is our Source and our only true Destiny. Francis helps us follow invisible decisions by visible examples. Francis learned to use beautiful examples from Jesus. As Christ describes during the Last Supper, His life flows through the vine to enliven us, who are the branches, Jn 15:5-10. God’s invisible life should flow through us as sap flows through the vine. If it does, it heals defects just as the vine grows over gaps from limbs lost during a storm. Hurricanes and tornados are unavoidable in life. But we can cooperate with Jesus as He repairs all damage. We cooperate with Christ by changing our bad decisions. We must take back the love we waste on trivial goods, and place all our love where it belongs. That conversion allows the sap of God’s life to flow through us.

Because we often give total love to partial creatures, Francis gives the example of the ancient Nazarenes. They took a vow to avoid the occasions of sin. They knew the steps of affection that Francis describes. Those steps reveal that we are desperate for God. So our desperation often overflows into rash decisions. We can love sour grapes because they nourish us in our desert of need for God. This proportional love is not harmful. But we harm ourselves if we tell ourselves that sour grapes are the best thing that ever happened to us. We hear that sweet grapes are even better. So if we have overcommitted ourselves to sour grapes, it is easy to overcommit to sweet ones. But we soon grow accustomed to what we have. Sweet grapes no longer produce the thrill that they first did. Grape juice is better still, so we overcommit to it. Wine is far superior, so we again overcommit. It’s an easy step from there to addiction. The wine-o, the alcoholic, is the end product of loving some creature with the love due to God alone. The drunk seeks God in the wrong place.

Francis describes the huge difference between proper and improper love for creatures. He provides the guidelines we need to love properly. Francis focuses our attention exactly where it should be, so that we can increase our devotion. Because he knows that each of us has different experiences, he gives another couple examples of adapting properly to what is happening. The fat deer hides from predators until it is trim enough to outrun them. The child grows up into more interesting things than butterflies. Francis urges us to grow up into God, Who alone deserves our entire commitment. He alone is good enough to deserve our entire being. All affections for lesser beings merely hinder our complete affection for God. We could say that Francis asks us to love what is lovable, as much as it is lovable.

But we are weak, and tend toward evil. Even though we are basically good gifts from God, we inherit Adam’s sin, which produces exactly what Adam wanted: the knowledge of evil. We know evil in everything we do. So we devastate many things. Francis properly balances these disturbing facts by recommending that we purge our evil inclinations.

**We Must Purge Ourselves of Our Evil Inclinations**

“We have certain natural inclinations, Philothea, that do not spring from particular sins, and are not properly sins, either mortal or venial. They are called imperfections, and the acts issuing from them are called defects and failings. For example, according to St. Jerome, St. Paula was so much inclined to sadness and grief that, after her children and husband died, she was in danger of dying of grief. This was an imperfection, but not a sin, since it was against her liking and will. Some people are naturally cheerful, while others are gloomy. Some contradict others, while others are inclined to indignation. Some are prone to anger, and some to love. In short, there are few people in whom we may not observe some such imperfections. Now although they are peculiar and natural to each of us, by care and a contrary affection, we can correct and restrain them, and even completely purify and free ourselves of them. Philothea, I insist that we must do this. Just as a way has been found to change bitter almond trees into sweet, by piercing them at the bottom, to let out the juice, why may not we let out our perverse inclinations, and thus improve? There is no nature so good that it cannot be perverted to evil by vicious habits. There is none so perverse that it cannot, first by God’s grace, and secondly by our own labor and care, be brought under control and overcome. I am now going to give you certain instructions, and propose certain exercises by which you can purge your soul of dangerous affections, imperfections, and all liking for venial sins, and safeguard your conscience more and more against all mortal sin. May God grant you the grace to practice them well.”[[69]](#endnote-69)

Because God is perfect, we must strive for perfection, so that we can increasingly unite with Him. To be one with Him is to identify with him. So His perfection requires our perfection. The difference is that God is perfectly active, while we must be perfectly receptive. That is the perfect blend of Love with beloved, of Gift with gifted. That is why Francis is sure that even our inclinations, which are not sins, must be realigned toward God. The only way to commit a sin is for the act to be actually evil, and for us to know that our decision is sinful, but freely decide to commit it anyway. Inclinations fail to meet all these three requirements. They themselves are not actually evil, we are often not aware of them, and they are not decisions. Inclinations incline us in the direction of sins, but are insufficient, of themselves, to be sins. For all that, they are incompatible with God’s total goodness. They must be eliminated before we unite with God. Francis gives a few examples of these tendencies. He assures us that even these inclinations must be corrected, so that we can live devoutly.

He reassures us that, however discouraged we may be by inveterate evil, a way can be found to change bitter almonds to sweet. We can encourage ourselves by this great change. Then we enthusiastically plunge into our conversion to God. Along the way we must guard against presumption, since even the most virtuous person may fall into perversion. Both doors are open, to improve or to fall. God’s grace does the major work, but our small part is essential. Without our free decision, nothing happens, either good or bad. But without God’s grace, we are too weak to pursue Him. Francis has now finished his general review of our human condition. The second part of his Introduction considers specific ways for us to improve. These details help us take small steps toward total devotion.

**Second Part of the Introduction**

**Various Instructions for Elevating the Soul to God by Prayer and the Sacraments**

**The Necessity of Prayer**

“Since prayer places our intellect in the brilliance of God’s light, and exposes our will to the warmth of his heavenly love, nothing else so effectively purifies our intellect of ignorance, and our will of depraved affections. It is a stream of holy water that flows forth, and makes the plants of our good desires grow green, and flourish, and quenches the passions within our hearts.

“I especially counsel you to practice mental prayer, the prayer of the heart, and particularly that centered on the life and passion of our Lord. By often turning your eyes to him in meditation, your whole soul will fill with him. You will learn his ways, and form your actions after his. He is ‘the light of the world’, Jn 8:12. Therefore, it is in him and by him & for him that we must be instructed and enlightened. He is the tree of desire, in whose shade we are refreshed, Cant 2:3. He is that living ‘fountain of Jacob’, Jn 4:6, in which we can wash ourselves clean of all our stains. Finally, just as little children learn to speak by listening to their mothers, and lisping words with them, so also by keeping close to our Savior in meditation, and observing his words, actions, and affections, we learn by his grace to speak, act, and choose like him.

“We must pause here, Philothea. I assure you that we cannot go to God the Father except through this gate, Jn 14:6. Just as the glass in a mirror could never catch our gaze unless there was tin or lead behind it, so also in this world, by our own efforts, we could not successfully contemplate the godhead, unless it had been united to the sacred humanity of our Savior. His life and death are the most fitting, sweet, wonderful, and profitable subject that we can choose for our ordinary meditations. It is not without purpose that our Savior calls himself ‘the bread that came down from heaven’, Jn 6:1. Just as bread is eaten with all kinds of food, so also the Savior should be meditated on, considered, and sought for in all our prayers and actions. His life and death have been analyzed and arranged according to various points, for purposes of meditation, by many authors. I recommend to you St. Bonaventure, Bellintani, Bruno, Capilia, Granada, and Du Pont.

“Set aside an hour every day before dinner, if possible early in the morning, when your mind is less distracted, and fresher after the night’s rest. Don’t extend it for more than an hour, unless your spiritual director expressly tells you to do so. If you can perform this exercise in church, and find sufficient quiet there, that will be the easiest and most convenient place for you, since no one … can very well keep you from spending an hour in church. … perhaps you could not be sure of a fee hour at home.

“Begin all your prayers, mental of vocal, in the presence of God. Keep to this rule without any exception, and you will quickly see how helpful it will be. If you follow my advice, Philothea, you will say your vocal prayers in Latin as well as in your native language … to appreciate the wonderful and beautiful meaning of these holy prayers. Say them with strict attention of mind, and with affections aroused by the meaning of the words. Do not hurry along, saying many things, but try to speak from your heart. A single Our Father said with feeling, has greater value than many said quickly. The rosary is a very useful form of prayer, provided you know how to say it properly. To do this, get one of the little books that teach us the way to recite it. It is also a good thing to say the litanies of our Lord, our Lady, and the saints, and other vocal prayers that may be found in approved manuals and books of hours. However, if you have the gift of mental prayer, you should always give it first place. Afterwards, if you cannot say your vocal prayers because of your many duties, or for some other reason, don’t be disturbed by that. Be satisfied with saying, either before or after your meditation, the Lord’s Prayer, the Hail Mary, and the Apostles’ Creed.

“During vocal prayer, if you find your heart drawn and invited to interior or mental prayer, don’t refuse to take it up. Let your mind turn very gently in that direction, and don’t be concerned at not finishing the vocal prayers you intended to say. The mental prayer you substitute for them is more pleasing to God, and more profitable for your soul. I make an exception for the Divine Office, if you are obliged to say it, as in that case you must fulfill your obligation.

“You must not miss morning mental prayer if at all possible. If it should happen, through pressure of business … that your whole morning has passed by, without this exercise of mental prayer, try to repair this loss after dinner. Do this some hours after your meal, since if you do it right away, before digestion, you would be drowsy, and your health might be injured. But if you cannot pray at any time during the day, you must repair the loss by multiplying ejaculatory prayers, and reading devotional books, together with some act of penance, which may prevent the bad consequences of this defect. Along with this, make a firm resolution to return to your custom on the next day.”[[70]](#endnote-70)

For Francis, prayer is paramount. Prayer is frankly the most important thing we do individually. Eucharist is the most important thing we do communally. Prayer bathes our mind in God’s brilliant Truth, and warms our will in God’s infinite Love. If we accept God’s invitation to pray, He floods us with His light and warmth. Perhaps we can’t identify God’s action because it is so vast. But as we pray more often, the benefits that Francis mentions begin to dawn upon us. We use symbols because prayer is too real for us to grasp. We can’t limit prayer’s activity to something small enough to comprehend. Instead, we take easy steps into the vastness of prayer. For example, we prepare to pray, we say individual vocal prayers, and we observe some results of prayer. These easy steps keep us going because they open us to God’s stupendous gifts. God loves us during prayer. He courts us ardently, to evoke our increased love for Him in return.

Francis recommends mental prayer because that is the most direct loving interaction we have with God. It is heartfelt prayer, or loving conversation with God. It is our most profoundly personal activity. God personally attends to us, drawing us to Himself by His Truth and Goodness. He wants us to be awed by His greatness, and to appreciate His loving attention. That’s why Francis calls prayer a stream of holy water that invigorates us, so that we can flourish. To aid that organic growth in God’s love, consistent prayer extinguishes our passions. Emotions are notorious distractions, often raging off, taking us where we really don’t want to go. We’ve been there before, and it stinks. Surely, we have noticed how God’s presence in prayer calms us. Once quieted down, we can be ourselves more completely than in any other activity. In this intense interaction, God fills our soul. He shows Himself to us, and invites us to be like Him. If we agree, we become ever more Christ-like. Jesus came to teach us how to pray. The Lord’s Prayer is exactly what we need to get going toward God. That’s why Francis incorporates it into mental prayer, also known as meditation.

In mental prayer, Christ enlightens us personally, on the way to illuminating the world communally. He refreshes us from our overheated stress, by pouring upon us the water of everlasting life. These marvelous expressions trace the invisible effects of prayer in some visible likenesses. Perhaps the most encouraging thing that Francis says is that we learn prayer the way a baby learns his mother-tongue, by baby-talk that increasingly imitates proper speech. God doesn’t mind our failures, so long as we strive to learn to pray. Like children imitating their parents, we imitate what Jesus does, and gradually identify with Him. Francis expresses the core of prayer by this baby-talk metaphor. Because prayer is infinitely expansive, we are forever learning to pray, forever imitating Christ, on our way to God.

Prayer is the only way to approach God. He initiates prayer by approaching us through Jesus, and we respond as best we can to His arrival. Francis says that Christ is the tin or lead (today, silver) on the glass that makes it a mirror. Without this reflective coating, we can’t see God. But once God incarnates as Jesus, we can see both God and the way to Him. By His incarnation, Christ becomes the way, truth, and life, Jn 14:6. He comes to save us from sin by redeeming us. Liked a pawned watch, Jesus buys us back, restoring God’s life to us. Because He does so much, we can’t cover all His achievements. No single analogy captures God’s accomplishments. So we use many analogies. Francis uses the nourishing analogy of bread. Everything goes better with Christ’s bread! His bread nourishes along with everything else in life. Therefore, Christ should be the central attraction of all our prayer.

Francis lists spiritual writers who were popular in his time. Since then, many additional authors offered inspiring meditative readings. There are many more books than we have time to read. All these inspirations ease us into mental prayer. But Jesus is the main attraction. His call entices us urgently, gently, and lovingly. Our response is feeble, but grows as we interact person-to-person with God. This is the personal communication that Francis helps us establish. Because it is personal, details will vary with individuals. For example, some of us can set aside an hour, but some of us can’t. Francis wrote this book for St. Jane de Chantal. She could afford the hour. She was busier than most of us, but insisted on praying for an hour in the morning. As we gradually adjust to personal interaction with God through Christ, we find that an hour may not be enough. We adjust as we grow. Our spiritual director helps us determine how much prayer we need.

When possible, seek to pray in church because Jesus is present there, body, blood, soul and divinity in the Eucharist. He is the Son Who guides our prayers to the Father, through the Spirit. The closer we are to Him, the easier it is to pray. We know this instinctively, so we are quiet in church. Therefore it is the most appropriate place to pray. If others are also praying, social magnification of prayer enables all who pray there to be more completely engaged. Jesus gives Himself in the Eucharistic sacrament, right there in church. So we respect His gift, reverence it, and give thanks for this miracle of supernatural grace. All His gifts entice us to pray, so we start best if we recall His presence, directly, and by His gifts. He is our center, giving us existence, and blessing us in more ways than we can count. As soon as we recall His presence, we begin to relax, unwind, and be more ourselves. Eventually, we can throw ourselves entirely into God’s loving arms, to be more one with Him. Remember how babies relax entirely into mother. We strive to do that with God.

Francis recommends that we say our prayers in Latin. A few people may succeed in that endeavor, but most of us will stick with English. Spanish is a more loving way to pray, and quite a few of us may do just that. It doesn’t matter to God, as He is not limited to words. He moves our heart. Francis recommends that we pray slowly, because we are speaking our love for God. He is not confined to time. Instead, He speaks His Love for all eternity in the Word. God invites us to join this conversation in the Trinity of Persons. It is the most delightful conversation possible. We can join this eternal conversation by prayer because Jesus invites us, and tells us that the Father and Holy Spirit want to join in our love feast.

If we honor Christ’s invitation, we gradually recognize that prayer is a love song. The more love we acknowledge, the less we fall into crippling anxiety, and the more relaxed we become. Because anxiety drives most of our hustle, when we renounce anxiety, our reason to rush disappears. Our worries are over, so we can relax. Then we hear some of the heavenly choir, and begin to sing in harmony. All off-tune, off-tempo, noise fades away, as we learn to pray. So Francis can say that one *Our Father* said with feeling is worth more than many said anxiously. By prayer, we acknowledge God’s unspeakable love for us. We accept it gratefully, and give thanks that God gives it so generously. Then we strive to return love, as best we can. This is how we speak from our heart. Prayerful conversation resembles “thanks for loving me; I love you”. This heart-felt love is the center of prayer. We can get there by trading facts with God. But prayer grows from the facts into this ultimate level of love. As we progress in mental prayer, sharing love replaces conversation. Perhaps the hour goes by without an identifiable word, but love flows from God to us, and from us to God. One French farmer described it memorably: “He looks at me; I look at Him.”

Francis knows that the rosary assists us to enter mental prayer. The repetitious Hail Mary’s, and repetitious in sync moving of beads through our fingers, focus our concentration upon the mysteries. Instead of the usual swirl of distractions, we leave this world behind, to launch into eternity. At first, launching is hard. But practice can perfect our take off into God’s presence, where we enjoy a preview of coming attractions, of heavenly bliss. Prayer provides a glimpse or two of paradise, as it prepares us to join God, the angels, and the saints. In heaven, we will blend into the eternal Trinitarian prayer, adding our spiritual voice to the heavenly choir. The rosary is great practice for this harmonious love song.

Each mystery of the rosary is a divine act that surpasses our comprehension. This surpassing activity is exactly what God created us to enjoy. So prayer is a homecoming to our family, our roots, our origin. Perhaps we must practice prayer for a while before we experience an inkling of this loving unity. Because God’s love is irresistible, if we freely agree to it, we necessarily improve our prayer by practicing it. As Francis notes, there are pamphlets to help us pray the rosary. One advantage of the rosary is that we can convert dead time into prayer time, as we walk from one place to another, in our daily round of duties. Perhaps we will be surprised to experience heightened awareness as we pray the rosary. We don’t have to worry about wandering into traffic when we say our beads.

Francis reminds us that vocal prayer leads naturally to mental prayer. At first, we may fight off the invitation to mental prayer because of a false sense of duty to finish our rosary. Instead, when God draws us ahead to mental prayer, hasten to follow. Vocal prayer is precisely our preparation for mental prayer. When Jesus beckons us closer into Him, we should agree, and switch to mental prayer. The only exception that Francis makes is the Divine Office. This set of psalms, prayers, and readings is the official prayer of the Church. Priests lovingly accept the obligation to say these prescribed prayers every day. This duty must be carried out. Similarly, vowed religious must not drift off from the words into mental prayer. But if this is not our duty, we can follow Christ wherever He leads us, even away from the Divine Office.

It is clear that we who work for our living may be distracted from prayer by unavoidable duties. Perhaps our tasks take up our hour with God. Francis recommends that we substitute an hour later in the day, to remedy this defect. On the other hand, if we were too lazy to pray, then we should do a penitential act to make up for our sin. Above all, we must regularly say daily prayers. These recommendations apply to everyone, adapted to each person’s duties. The stage is now set for Francis to expound his method of mental prayer. Millions of people pray his way, and progress ever nearer to God.

**A Short Method of Meditation; Emphasizing the First Point of Preparation: Presence of God**

“It may be that you do not know how to pray mentally, Pholothea. Unfortunately, this is something that few people in our time know how to do. For this reason, I will give you a short, simple method to use, until you are more fully instructed by reading some of the many good books written on the subject, and above all by practice. I will first explain the preparatory part. This consists in two points: 1) place yourself in the presence of God, and 2) invoke his assistance. To help you place yourself in God’s presence, I propose four principal means that you can use for this beginning.

“The first consists of a lively, attentive realization of God’s absolute presence, that is, that God is in all things and all places. There is no place or thing in this world where he is not truly present. Just as wherever birds fly they always encounter the air, so also wherever we go … we find God present. Everyone knows this truth, but everyone does not try to bring it home to himself. Blind men do not see a prince who is present among them, and therefore do not show him the respect they do after being told of his presence. However, because they do not actually see him, they easily forget his presence. Having forgotten it, they still more easily lose the respect and reverence owed to him. Unfortunately, Philothea, we do not see God who is present with us. Although faith assures us of his presence, yet because we do not see him with our eyes, we often forget about him, and behave as if God were far distant from us. We really know that he is present in all things, but because we do not reflect on that fact, we act as if we did not know it. This is why before praying we must always arouse our souls to explicit thought and consideration of God’s presence. Such was David’s mental state when he cried out: ‘If I go up to the heavens, O my God, you are there. If I descend into hell, you are there.’ Ps 138:8. Hence we should use the words of Jacob when he saw the sacred ladder: ‘How awesome is this place! Truly the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.’ Gen 28:17. The meaning is that he did not reflect on God’s presence, for he could not have been ignorant of the fact that God is in everything and every place. Therefore, when you prepare to pray, you must say with your whole heart: ‘O my heart, my heart, God is truly here!’

“The second way to place yourself in God’s holy presence is to remember that he is not only in the place where you are, but also that he is present in a most particular manner in your heart, and in the very center of your spirit. He enlivens and animates it by his divine presence. He is there as the heart of your heart, and the spirit of your spirit. Just as the soul is diffused throughout the entire body, and is therefore present in every part of the body, but resides in a special manner in the heart, so also God is present in all things, but always resides in a special manner in our spirit. For this reason, David calls him ‘the God of his heart’, Ps 72:26. St. Paul says that ‘we live, and move, and are in God’, Act 7:28. Therefore, in consideration of this truth, excite in your heart great reverence toward God, who is so intimately present in it.

“A third way is to consider how our Savior in his humanity gazes down from heaven on all mankind, and particularly on Christians, who are his children, and most especially on those who are at prayer, whose actions and conduct he observes. This is by no means a mere figment of the imagination, but the very truth. Although we do not see him, it remains true that from on high he beholds us. At the time of his martyrdom, St. Stephen saw him in this way, Act 7:54-60. Hence we may truly say with the Spouse ‘Here, he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, looking through the lattices’, Cant 2:9.

“A fourth method to use simple imagination, presenting the Savior to us in his sacred humanity, as if he were near us, just as we sometimes imagine a friend to be present. Then say, ‘I imagine that I see [be specific] who is doing [something definite]’. Or we say ‘I seem to see him’[specify]. If the Most Blessed Sacrament of the altar is present, then Christ’s presence is real, rather than imaginary. The species and appearances of bread are like a tapestry behind which our Lord is really present. He sees and observes us, though we do not see him in his human form. You will employ one of these four means of placing yourself in the presence of God before prayer. Do not use them all at once, but only one at a time, and that briefly and simply.”[[71]](#endnote-71)

Francis shows easy steps for us to make mental prayer. Starting with the simplest experience, he builds slowly. Preparation enables us to leave pressing distractions behind. First we recognize God’s presence. In His Love we can relax, abandon swirling vanities and our silly love for them, and rest safe in His arms. Cradled in His love, we can ask our beloved Father to help us pray. God initiates our prayer by creating us, sustains our prayer by maintaining our existence, and inspires our prayer by His many loving gifts. There is no better place to be than in His presence. His love supports everything. When He creates, He establishes all that exists, and maintains all creatures. He is the ground upon which everything rests. Therefore, we are most at home in His presence.

Still, we often neglect Him. We focus on a series of silly creatures instead of on Him. We overrate the value of some creature, and waste precious time on pumping it up like a balloon. Its momentary glitter distracts us from the only presence that counts. Its vanity is obvious. If we insist upon the vanity of some creature, we can force ourselves to grab for value in it, but every grasp fails. Each attempt is chasing the wind, Ecc 1:14; 17; 2:11; 17; 26; 4:4; 6; 9. Francis, fully aware of this problem, gives us four ways to counteract distractions, so that we can arrive in God’s presence.

The first is God’s absolutely necessary presence to create everything. To make every space exist, God must create it. If there is a place, God made it. So he can’t be absent from any place. Francis gives the beautiful example of birds flying in air. The only way for birds to fly is sustained by the air, and in the air. Air envelops and enables birds to breathe and to beat their wings to fly. So it is with us and God’s creative presence. When we were children, we naturally lived in God’s presence. We took God for granted. As we age, most of us distract ourselves from God’s enveloping creative presence. We forget the air we breathe. Francis reminds us that everyone knows that God is present, but we do not turn to that presence as a fact. Instead, we resemble the blind man who does not see the prince, so is unaware of his presence. Too often, we blind ourselves to God. When we sin, we impose increasing blindness upon ourselves. We impose blindness as we banish God from our heart by choosing sin instead of Him. We often run away from God. He is the Good we should choose. But we banish Him, and put some creature in His place. Because we can’t outright dismiss God, we blind ourselves to His presence. This weird substitute for facing God is easier than rejecting Him directly. We impose the appearance of His absence by blinding our spiritual eyes.

If our sin is less blatant, we claim that God is far distant from us. Either way, we lie by denying His intimate presence. This lie has absolutely no value, but it does shut down some of our spiritual vision, blinding us. David blinded himself in order to sin. In the Psalms, he describes how he sinned, and how he repented. We profit from these descriptions, and can profit even more by repeating them. Repetition focuses our attention upon this truth, to let its significance sink in. The decision to see God again counteracts our decisions to banish Him. Gradually, we regain our sight. Reminding ourselves of God’s presence improves our vision by countering attempts to blind ourselves. Each attempt to put ourselves in God’s presence corrects our attempt to escape His presence. Francis recommends overcoming previous decisions by present decisions. What we have done, we can undo. Scripture is full of people like David, Jacob, and Paul, who overcome banishing God by subsequently accepting his presence. Firm decisions are best, so Francis encourages us to passionately affirm, with all our hearts, that God is present.

The second way that Francis suggests is to recognize God’s love at the center of our heart. He is the heart of our heart, the spirit of our spirit. His love bursts through our nothingness to create us. Children know that God is in their heart. We should remind ourselves that His love establishes our very center. His Person makes our person be. There is no more intimate love than that. God’s act of creative love evokes us out of oblivion. His love activates us from vacuum. Francis gives us the excellent example of our soul animating our body. Its activity diffuses throughout our body, but centers in our person, residing at the core of our spirit. Because these are spiritual relationships, there is no spatial center or core. But our spirited flesh must employ material analogies to convey immaterial realities. If we ponder what Francis says, we look directly through the material reference to the spiritual activity. That’s what David means by “the God of my heart”. Paul is even more forceful: “we live, and move, and are in God”. Words fail to fully express our spiritual experiences, but they point toward them. Francis realizes that each way to remember God’s presence is so full of meaning that he can’t say everything that he knows about each approach to God’s love. Of course that makes perfect sense, because God is infinite.

A third way to recall God’s intimacy with us is to see Jesus as appears in His Incarnate Self. His infinite generosity stuns us. How can we conceive of God Himself becoming human? His power exceeds our understanding. But here God is: Jesus Christ, visible, tangible, in the dust with us. We can’t get to Him across the infinity dividing divinity from humanity. So He crosses that infinite divide when He comes to us, incarnate in Mary in Nazareth, growing in her for nine months, and born in Bethlehem. His presence in the flesh soars beyond us, rejoices us anyway. We skip over our ignorance of how He comes, and greet Him with great joy because He comes. Wherever we are in our relationship to Jesus, this third way of accepting His presence effectively advances us closer to Him. True, we can tire of everything here below, so we use the other methods to refresh our prayer. We overcome our weakness by varying our methods, to keep our attention sharp.

Francis gives us a fourth method: to imagine interacting with Christ. We can picture ourselves present during His life, helping with His jobs, learning from His teaching, and mourning His death. We can do this on a busy street, but it’s much easier to do in church, where Jesus resides in Eucharistic disguise. Marvelous teacher that Jesus is, He gives us sensory information to get our attention. The appearance of bread appeals to us, providing just what we need to focus. But we know that behind that visible tapestry Our Lord is entirely there. Christ said as much on several occasions, Mt 26:25; Mk 14:22; Lk 22:19; Jn 5:51; 1 Cor 11:24. Because Jesus is God, His word is necessarily true. When we exercise God’s gift of faith on His word, we agree with God’s truth, even though it soars past our comprehension. Christ is the substance, or reality, there in the appearance of bread. When we review this reality, we accept His presence, and delight in His love.

Whichever of these four ways we use to acknowledge God’s presence, we profit from concentrating on one at a time. Now and then, we try to do too much, thereby tripping ourselves up. Experience teaches us to stop trying to take three steps at a time. One-at-a-time suits us better. Trying too many ways to remind us of God’s presence exhausts us on the preliminary steps, so we can’t exert ourselves on the main event of prayer. If we consider one way to note God’s presence per prayer, then we calm ourselves, dump distractions, and focus on God right here with us. Francis gives excellent practical advice for settling into God’s loving arms. Then we are ready for the next step of prayerful meditation.

**The Invocation, the Second Point of Preparation**

“The invocation is made in the following way. Knowing that it stands in God’s presence, your soul prostrates itself before him with the most profound reverence. It acknowledges that it is most unworthy to appear before such sovereign majesty. But since it knows that this same supreme goodness wills that it should be so, it implores his grace in order to serve and adore him properly in this meditation. If you so wish, you can use some short, ardent words, such as David’s: ‘O God, cast me not out from your presence, and your Holy Spirit take not from me’, Ps 50:13. ‘Let your face shine upon your servant’, Ps 30:17; 118:135. ‘I will consider the wonders of your law’, Ps 118:18. ‘Give me discernment, and I will keep it with my whole heart’, Ps 118:34. ‘I am your servant; give me discernment’, 118:125. It will be helpful to invoke your guardian angel, as well as the holy saints who took part in the mystery on which you meditate. For example, when meditation in the death of Our Lord, you can invoke Our Lady, St. John, Mary Magdalen, and the good thief, begging that the affections and interior movements they conceived may be shared with you. When meditating on your own death, you can invoke your guardian angel, who will then be with you, to inspire you with suitable considerations.”[[72]](#endnote-72)

Francis emphasizes the loving family that Jesus established. God adopted us to be His children, exemplified in the prayer Christ taught: “Our Father”, Mt 6:9. So we balance profound reverence for our infinite Creator with profound intimacy when we call God Abba (daddy), Mk 14:36. God wills that we be His little children. He loves us to invoke Him, to call upon Him always. He loves for us to share all our little events, our joys and sorrows, our success and failure. In this loving context, we understand David’s heart-rending calls to God in the Psalms. Francis recommends that we call from our hearts to beg God’s inspiration. We pray that God inspire us to understand more so that we can love more. Remember that God started this loving feedback. He loved us first. So we ask His help to accept His love, and love Him in return.

Francis made his loving context quite clear to the people of his time. But they lived without the distractions that plague us today, scattering our attention to many mechanical substitutes for love. For most people now, love disappears, and many of us see only hatred swirling around us. Therefore, we need reminders of God’s love. Remember that every little thing we see flows from His heart, for love of us. If we look past all distracting technical details, to see God’s creation, we contact His merciful love directly. In His love, we relax, and readily invoke Him to help us make mental prayer. Even so, God remains all-powerful, therefore intimidating.

So we often prefer to invoke less awesome angels and saints. Naturally we turn to saints who were intimately connected the event we consider. Francis gives us excellent examples that remind us of our own family interactions. We talked more with our brothers and sisters than with our parents. We talked with mom before we tried talking to dad. God adopts us into His divine family, where these natural inclinations fit perfectly.

**The Third Point of Preparation: the Subject of the Mystery**

“In addition to these two ordinary points in the preparation, there is a third, which is not common to every kind of meditation. Some call this third point the composition of place, and others the interior lesson. It is simply to imagine a picture of the mystery you wish to consider, as if it really took place here before us. For example, if you wish to meditate on Our Lord on the Cross, imagine that you are on Mt. Calvary, and that there you see and hear all that was done or said on the day of his passion. Of if you wish, for it is all one, imagine that in the very place where you are, our Lord is crucified in the manner described by the holy evangelists. It is the same when you meditate on death, as I have noted in the meditation on it, and so also on hell, or on any similar mystery in which visible and sensible objects form part of the subject. As to other mysteries, such as God’s greatness, the excellent value of the virtues, or the end for which we have been created, such things are invisible, and there is no question of using our imagination in this way. It is true that we may use some similitude or comparison to assist us in our consideration of them, but this involves some difficulty. My intention is to explain this so simply that your mind will not be too much concerned about using such devices.

“By such imaginative means, we restrict our mind to the mystery on which we meditate, so that it will not wander about, just as we cage a bird, or put a leash on a hawk, so he can rest on our hand. Perhaps someone will tell you that it is better to represent such mysteries by the simple thoughts of faith, with completely intellectual and spiritual concepts, or else to consider them as taking place within your own soul. This method is too subtle for beginners. Until God raises you up higher, Philothea, I advise you to remain in the low valley I have shown you.”[[73]](#endnote-73)

Francis emphasizes how important it is to imagine ourselves right in the mystery. God’s greatest creation is our spiritualized flesh. God’s master-work infuses our brute matter with our intelligent spirit. Only God can elevate passive space-occupying matter into a human whose active spirit makes matter conscious. We are marvelous beings, integrating inert body with active soul. That is why Francis urges us to use our imagination to follow God’s revelation.

In His infinite mercy, God reveals Himself to our spirited flesh. He gives us direct access to His infinite secrets. In Christ, God enables us to see and touch divinity. So we can imagine this Incarnate God doing what Jesus did. This very fact is worthy of intense meditation. But it is rather abstract. Christ’s passion is better suited to our gifts of sensing external appearances, imagining internal appearances, and understanding their meaning and value. For now, we emphasize our basic presence on Mt. Calvary. We can review the sensory surface of this profound mystery of mercy. That’s what Francis means by imagining the entire mystery. We picture all that we would have seen if we had been present during our salvation, as Jesus lived it on Calvary. Eye-witnesses, like St. John, record enough in Scripture for us to vividly imagine How Jesus died for us on the cross. We glorify God by employing our imaginations to join in Christ’s suffering and death.

It is true, Francis adds, that we can consider invisible mysteries, but these are too abstract for beginners. They are like the mountains that we can scale after we grow strong by hiking in the valley. Later, Francis will help us advance from the flat, to the hilly, to the mountainous meditations. For now, images attach us to the mystery. God is so pleased with our efforts, that He rewards us with deeper insight into each mystery we consider. Our ongoing progress delights us, and pleases God. The great value of meditating on a mystery is that forever-new facets of the mystery emerge. It is infinite, so it never ends. Finally, we reach the goal we so urgently seek. We find the inexhaustible truth and good that God created us to possess. We gain it by imagining its surface. Then we can penetrate to its depths. That’s why Francis gives the example of tethered birds. The leash keeps the bird within our view. Without such ties, the bird flies away, beyond our sight. Considering it this way, we realize that the leash keeps us connected so that we do not fall away into distractions.

This preparation will be easy because many mysteries fascinate us. Pick one to examine in our mediation, then jump into it by imagining ourselves intimately connected to its observable surface. God appreciates our efforts, is delighted when our spirited flesh accepts His revelation, and draws us into the invisible spirit of the mystery. There we rest because we have come home to God’s family. God the Father adopts us through Christ His Son, Who incites His Spirit to unite us ever more completely. This is how we join the Trinity’s intimate activity. When we rest in the mystery, we seem to be passive. Actually, we are quite active because the Holy Spirit expands our mind into the meaning of the mystery. As we expand into meaning, we find more and more value. The truth reveals the good. So the Holy Spirit expands our heart into the value of the mystery. Even though we do not notice the Spirit acting, we become increasingly active by knowing and loving. Because God’s mysteries are intimately integrated with His Persons, we spiral toward personal unity. This inter-personal interaction is the peak of our existence. We love to live in this personal way. Then we live to love. God’s mercy provides this union, if we cooperate. Thus prepared, Francis proceeds to meditation’s second part: considerations.

**Considerations, the Second Part of Meditation**

“After the imagination has done its part, there follows the act of the intellect, and this we call meditation. This is simply making one or more considerations, in order to raise our affections to God, and his things. Hence meditation differs from study, and other thoughts and considerations, done not to acquire virtue or love of God, but for other ends and intentions. For example: to become learned, to write, etc. Having restricted our mind within the limits of the subject we wish to meditate on, … whether by imagination, if the subject is sense perceptible, or by a simple proposal, if it is not sensible, then begin by forming considerations of it on the pattern of meditations I have given you. If your mind finds enough appeal, light, and fruit in any of them, remain with that point, and do not go on any further. Imitate the bees, who do not leave a flower as long as they can extract nectar from it. But if you do not come on anything that appeals to you, after you have examined it for a while, then go on to another, but proceed calmly and simply, and do not rush yourself.”[[74]](#endnote-74)

Francis proceeds from the first part of meditation, called preparation, to the second part, which is consideration of a topic. As we consider, or ponder, or wonder about, this topic, we advance from our superficial sensory image to its meaning and value. Behind every appearance is something more stable. Under each sensation is some reliable truth and goodness. Clearly, sensations ripple and run away. Within seconds, some appearances change almost beyond recognition. But the being sending out these sensations remains stable. It exists as it is, one thing, behind shifting sights, sounds, and scents. For example, the dashing dog, now sun-lit, now shaded, is a single being, whether it barks or sleeps. Just as we leave its sensations behind when we think deeply the dog, so we work from appearances of a mystery to its meaning. This move from surface to depth is our main meditation activity. When God created things that are bounded by material limits, He crowned them by creating humans to understand them. When we comprehend them, we appreciate their goodness, so that we can offer them back to God, gift for gift. This way we are nature’s priest. We do for limited beings what they cannot do for themselves. We meditate upon them, grasp their meaning and value, then offer this truth and goodness back to God. We can do this for a sunset, or for the more significant mysteries that God mercifully reveals to us in Christ.

While considering His redeeming death on the cross, we penetrate past observable appearances on Calvary, to find God’s infinite love at work saving us. Though we can’t see His mercy and His justice, we can see His blood flowing to redeem us from sin, and to pay the last penny of our debt. When we consider these invisible realities, behind their visible limits, God leads us into deeper appreciation of His redemption. Francis reminds us to dwell with these inestimable goods as long as we derive benefit from them. Above all, he recommends that we never rush from point to point. Clearly, our joy in this contemplation can overexcite us, urging us to cram more joy into our meditation. No doubt, our prayer should delight us. But all mysteries provide a wider range of experiences, beyond delight. If we rush to enjoy another point, we lose the benefits of personal interaction with Jesus on the cross, specifically with His sorrow. How silly is it to try to enjoy excitement while Christ is dying in agony?

Even worse, our pleasure-seeking backfires. Seeking to enjoy more, quicker, actually kills our joy. Instead of trying to gobble down pleasure, we want to follow the advice Frances gives: “proceed calmly and simply”. If we do, then the Person who dies on the cross speaks to our hearts ever more intimately. Because we distract ourselves so often, and so severely, we want to repent, and to concentrate on the love that flows like blood from Christ’s open wounds. Proper respect for His love should slow us down to an appropriately personal pace. The entire point of meditation is to skip distractions, so that we can emphasize person-to-person knowing and loving. Then God interacts more perfectly with us.

This second part can blossom into entirely new dimensions. Often they are so new that we did not know they even existed. We can become so personally involved with Our Redeeming Savior that we live increasingly as He did. Then our love begins to resemble Love Himself. From this love, our mercy begins to flow, just as mercy flowed from Jesus. Devotion to meditation is the secret. Francis became more and more like Christ by meditating on His incarnate acts. In His flesh, Jesus lived mercy. As Francis loves Christ more, he identifies more with Him. Therefore, Francis became more merciful. Everything about Francis became more like everything about Jesus, including emotions. The third part of meditation is the source of his emotional empathy, and his decisions to serve God and neighbor.

**Affections and Resolutions, the Third Part of Meditation**

“Meditation produces devout movements in the affective part of our soul. For example, love of God and neighbor, desire for heaven and glory, zeal for saving souls, imitation of Christ’s life, compassion, awe, joy, fear of displeasing God, worry about judgment and hell, hatred of sin, confidence in God’s goodness and mercy, and deep sorrow for the sins of our past life. By such affections, our mind should open up as much as possible. If you wish to be assisted in this, open the first volume of the *Meditations* by Dom Andrea Capiglia. In its preface, he shows how to expand these affections…

“However, you must not dwell so long on these general reflections, Philothea, that you fail to change them into specific and detailed resolutions to correct and improve yourself. For example, Our Lord’s first word spoken on the cross will undoubtedly excite in your soul a holy longing to imitate him, namely a desire to pardon your enemies and to love them. I point out that this will be only a little thing, unless you add a specific resolution. For example, resolve to endure a definite irritation from a definite person. Decide to act specifically to win over and appease an individual. Then you will correct your faults quickly. Mere affections will not help quickly, but might drag on slowly, and difficultly.”[[75]](#endnote-75)

With this practical advice, Francis helps us advance from consideration to decision. In between, he tells us to arouse our emotions, so that we can desire to imitate Christ by putting His example on the cross into effect in our life. Just gazing at our image of His crucifixion, rouses a riot of emotions, especially sorrow. Sorrow helps us to repent our sins. But repentance includes practical actions to make firm our resolution to do what God wants. Doing God’s will produces the results we want. That’s why Francis insists upon the very next step: decide to endure a definite hurt from a specific person. That resolution focuses our emotions to make them effective. Choose an individual to placate. Decide to do something specific to win him over. Francis thus applies our affections to make decisions, to change our lives. If we sense a large object hovering over us at midnight, our sensation sets off an automatic emotional response of fear. We can use fear of hell to motivate us away from sin.

In the opposite direction, if we imagine Christ on the cross, we experience a range of emotions. We are sorry that He died, but joyful that He saved us from sin. We can use this joy of salvation to motivate us towards Jesus. Emotion initiates motion toward or away from something that we sense. So we use our emotions to move deeper into sensory appearances. Deeper in, we find what the sensations mean, and how good they are. Francis knows this follows from joining Jesus on Calvary. Then we are properly motivated to decide on some manageable action. This practical result makes us different. We are what we do. So if we do what Christ would do, we become more Christ-like. If we follow the instructions that Francis gives, we advance step by step into deeper devotion. Then we can conclude our meditation.

**Conclusions and spiritual Bouquet**

“Finally, we must conclude our meditation with three acts, made with the greatest possible humility. The first is thanksgiving, by which we return thanks to God for the affections and resolutions he gave us, and for his goodness and mercy, which we have found in the mystery on which we meditated. The second is offering, by which we give to God his own goodness and mercy, his son’s death, Blood, and virtues, and in union with them, our own affections and resolutions. The third act is supplication, by which we beseech God, and implore him, to share with us the graces and virtues of his Son, and to bless our affections and resolutions, so that we may faithfully fulfill them. We then pray for the Church, our pastors, relatives, friends, and others, using for that purpose the intercession of Our Lady, the angels and saints. Lastly, we must say the Our Father and Hail Mary, which are the general and necessary prayers of all the faithful.

“Then you must gather a little devotional bouquet. … People who have been walking about in a beautiful garden do not like to leave without gathering in their hands four or five flowers to smell and keep for the rest of the day. In the same, way when our soul has carefully considered by meditation a certain mystery, we should select one, two, or three points that we liked best, and that are most adapted to our improvement. Then we should think frequently about them, and smell them spiritually during the rest of the day. We collect this bouquet in the place where we meditated, either remaining there alone, or walking by ourselves for some time.”[[76]](#endnote-76)

After these three steps, so simply expressed, Francis draws their conclusion. We appreciate the simplicity and effectiveness of his method. We agree that, properly prepared, our meditation produces several thoughts worth saving and savoring. Perhaps our affections and decisions also produce worthwhile results. If we gather the most important of them into a spiritual bouquet, we can admire these flowers, and remember them during the day. These are the points that we liked best during our meditation. Their spiritual beauty and spiritual fragrance resemble material flowers so much that we “pick” them to remind us of this prayer, so blessed by God’s love. The good spiritual odor of our prayer then suffuses throughout our day, even if we must attend carefully to job-related tasks. What a lovely thought this bouquet is, and how beautiful it is in practice. How practical it is. From this short sketch of his method, we see how effective it is. Francis rounds out his excellent advice on meditation with a few follow-up recomendations.

**Useful Instructions About Meditation**

“Most of all, Philothea, after you rise from meditation, you must remember the resolutions and decisions you made, and carefully put them into effect on that very day. This is the great fruit of meditation. Without it, meditation is often not only useless, but even harmful. Virtues meditated on, but not practiced, sometimes inflate our minds to think that we are already what we thought and resolved. Certainly this is true if our resolutions are lively and solid. They are not solid, but are even vain and dangerous, if we do not practice them. By all means, therefore, we must strive to practice them, and to seek occasions, small or great, to do so. For example, if I have resolved to win over, by mildness, the hearts of those who offend me, I will look this very day for an opportunity to meet them, and greet them in a friendly way. If I cannot meet them, at least I will speak of them, and pray to God in their behalf.

“After finishing your mental prayer, watch against disturbing your heart, lest you spill the balm that it has received through prayer. I mean that, if possible, you must keep silence for a little while, and gently transfer your heart from prayer to other duties. Preserve as long as you can the feelings and affections you have conceived. A man who has been given a precious liquid in a porcelain vase to carry home, walks carefully, does not look from side to side, but looks straight ahead, for fear of stumbling against a stone, or making a false step. He also looks at the vase to see that it doesn’t spill. You must do the same thing after you finish your meditation. Don’t let anything distract you. Simply look straight ahead. In other words, if you meet anyone with whom you have to talk, nothing can be done about it, and you must adapt yourself to the situation. However, you must keep watch on your heart, so that as little of the liquor of holy prayer as possible is spilt out.

“You must also accustom yourself to know how to pass from prayer to all the various duties your vocation and state of life rightly and lawfully require of you, even though they appear far different from the affections you received in prayer. I mean that the lawyer must be able to pass from prayer to pleading cases, the merchant to commerce, and the married woman to her duties as wife, and her household tasks, with so much ease and tranquility that their minds are not disturbed. Since both prayer and your other duties are in conformity with God’s will, you must pass from one to the other with a devout and humble mind.

“It may sometimes happen that immediately after the preparation, you will feel that your affections are drawn wholly towards God. In this case, Philothea, you must give them free rein, and not follow the method I have shown you. Ordinarily, consideration must precede affections and resolutions. However, when the Holy Spirit gives you the affections before the consideration, you must not look for the consideration, since it is used only to arouse the affections. In a word, whenever affections present themselves, you must accept them, and make room for them, whether they come before or after all the considerations. Although I have put the affections after all the considerations, I have done so merely to distinguish more clearly between the parts of prayer. In fact, it is a general rule never to restrain the affections, but to let them have a free course when they present themselves. I say this not only with regard to the other affections, but also in respect to acts of thanksgiving, offering, and prayer, which may likewise be made during the considerations. They must not be restrained any more than the other affections, although later it is necessary to resume, and repeat them as a conclusion to the meditation. As for the resolutions, they must always be made after the affections, and at the end of the whole meditation, before the conclusion, since in them we represent to ourselves particular, familiar objects. Hence if we placed them among the affections, they would expose us to distractions.

“When we are forming our affections and resolutions, it is good to employ colloquies, and to speak sometimes to Our Lord, sometimes to angels and to persons represented in the mysteries, to saints, ourselves, our own hearts, sinners, and even to insensible creatures, as we see David doing the Psalms, and other saints in their prayers and meditations.”[[77]](#endnote-77)

No sooner has Francis given us distinct parts of prayer than he urges us to flex them. If the Holy Spirit sweeps us into affections during our consideration, let ourselves go with Him. Prayer is person interaction. So we should never impose artificial steps where God is already naturally interacting with us. Perhaps you recall how diligently you prepared a speech for a friend, to request a favor. Before you begin your speech, your friend offers to give you your request. You don’t say: “Stop, I have to request first”. Instead, scrap your speech, and thank your friend for his gift. Go with the flow of his generosity. This is true, in spades, when you interact with God. When He inspires you directly, scrap your considerations, and rejoice in His gift. Early in our life of prayer, we might interrupt God because we don’t know better. But we should learn to accept His gift, instead of imposing our request for it. Francis warns against this mistake. If we heed his warning, we maximize our profit from letting God take charge of our prayer. We pray in order to interact lovingly with God. When He loves us, we should accept His love, and let our plans go. Francis says: don’t try to restrain God.

The opposite problem usually arises. We do not feel God’s loving inspiration. That’s why we invoke Him, and His friends, to draw us closer together. The point of prayer is to interact lovingly. So we grasp whatever promotes that interaction. We strive to magnify our affection for God, angels, saints, and people present for the mystery we consider. Every effort we make will help us grow more affectionate with God. It’s like adding fuel to a fire. If we stoke the small fire, it grows. In prayer we want to add as much affection as we can, to make a blazing bonfire, to make a holocaust. We recognize that we need much more love than we can imagine. Our love-need is unlimited. So we should do everything we can to feed the fire of love. Francis did exactly that, with wonderful results. When we use his method, we can ask him to enflame our hearts. Our efforts are vital because the flames of love die down. Often, they fade and flicker. Switching to a water analogy, we often say that our prayer dries up. Francis gives us advice about dry prayer.

**The Dryness Sometimes Experienced in Meditation**

“If it should happen that you find no joy or comfort in meditation, Philothea, I urge you not to be disturbed, but to open your heart’s door to words of vocal prayer. Express sorrow for yourself to Our Lord, confess your unworthiness, ask him to help you, kiss his image, and repeat Jacob’s words: ‘Lord, I will not let you go until you bless me’, Gen 32:26. The Canaanite woman agreed: Yes, Lord, I am a dog: ‘for the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table’, Mt 15:27. At other times, turn to some spiritual book, and read it attentively, until your mind is awakened and restored within you. Sometimes you can arouse your heart by some act or movement of exterior devotion, like prostrating yourself on the ground, crossing your hands over your breast, or embracing a crucifix. It is understood that you are in some retired place.

“After this, if you have not received any consolation, do not be disturbed, no matter how great the dryness may be, but continue to maintain a devout posture before God. How many courtiers go a hundred times a year into the prince’s presence without any hope of speaking to him, but merely to be seen by him, and do their duty. We too, my dear Philothea, ought to approach holy prayer purely and simply to do our duty, and testify to our fidelity. If it pleases his Divine majesty to speak to us, and aid us by his holy inspirations and interior consolations, it is certainly a great honor, and the sweetest of delights. But if it does not please him to grant this favor, and he leaves without speaking to us, just as if he did not see us at all, or we were not in his presence, we must not leave for that reason. On the contrary, we must remain with a respectful and devotional attitude in the presence of his sovereign goodness. He will unfailingly be pleased with our patience, and take note of our diligence and perseverance, so that when we again come before him, he will favor and help us by his consolations, and enable us to see how sweet holy prayer is. Yet if he does not do so, Philothea, let us be content that it is the very greatest honor for us to stand before him in his sight.”[[78]](#endnote-78)

Normally, prayer is such a joy that we love to accept and return God’s love. But hardly anyone continues in this delightful mutual loving. Instead, prayer’s delight disappears. Perhaps we become accustomed to our level of enjoyment. Perhaps we distract ourselves from loving interaction. Perhaps we insist upon milking more joy from prayer. For whatever reason, God’s presence disappears. Where His loving bliss once flourished, we find a vacuum. Then our joy sours to sorrow; our fascination curdles into boredom. Maybe this dryness is our trial. God tests us to see why we pray. If we pray merely to feel good, then we quit praying when we feel bad. In this case, dryness is our opportunity to purify our motives, so that we pray to please our beloved God. That’s why Francis says we should start reciting vocal prayers. This recitation is definite evidence that we pray to please God. If we express our sorrow that bliss has departed from our prayers, then we honor God even as we lose our joy. If we confess our unworthiness, we state the truth. We had no right to the delight God gave us. We miss it, but continue to follow Jesus in this painful dry spell.

In this dry state, we insist on praying because God deserves our prayer. We do not deserve the consolation we received from God. Though we wish that God’s delightful presence would console us once more, we are sure that He is present, even if we do not notice Him. In His unnoticed presence, like Jacob, we ask for His blessing. Like the Canaanite woman, we appreciate the scraps that fall on the floor. We recognize in this dry experience a painful test of our loving obedience. So we beg mercy from God during this hardship. We decide to use it to evoke our heartfelt generosity. Francis knows that people sometime struggle to pray. Therefore, he recommends reading an inspiring spiritual book. When even this reading fails to arouse our ardent love, we can put our body in a position of praise and submission. If we prostrate ourselves, or lay ourselves flat, we express our devastation well. If we adopt a position expressing our need, we pray with all our bodily being. So we can cross our hands over our chest, or embrace a crucifix, to pray when we are mentally dry.

Ordinary Americans don’t do this. That’s exactly why we can benefit from these unique practices. Their rarity expresses our unusual desire to please God. During our dry spell, we want our love for God to grow until we really want to please Him, instead of ourselves. This is the basic change that Frances recommends. It is a more radical conversion to God. We convert more entirely if we continue to pray when prayer becomes dry. In His mercy, God usually provides delightful consolation when we pass this trial. The trial question is: Do you love the consolation of God, or the God of consolation? This is the fundamental trial of our lives: do we prefer our good feelings to Goodness Himself?

That’s why Francis says next that if our efforts fail to produce consolation, don’t worry. Instead of fretting about self, keep making devout efforts for God. Our unfailing efforts demonstrate our good faith, our steadfast heart, and our determination to obtain the good we need from merciful God. This is the way to pass God’s test of our motivation. We waste time if we mourn losing prayer’s joy. Instead, we press on purely and simply to do our duty, following from our love, to be faithful, to fulfill our obligations to God. Once He knows that we pray because we love Him, He may inspire and console us. That is a great honor, and the sweetest of delights. But, Francis shows, if God does not manifest Himself, we must persevere in prayer anyway. When God is silent, we maintain our reverential devotion. Then our diligence and perseverance show our love. We deepen our love to approach the depth of His love, Ps 43:7. Francis reminds us that it is a superlative honor to pray to Him, even if there is no sign of His approval. This good advice helps us overcome the most disappointing experience of prayer. Because we are weak, God will not leave us high and dry for very long. Mother Teresa of Calcutta was so strong that God left her dry for 40 years. She is a good example of praying for God’s sake.

**Summary of What We Covered**

Francis gives us exceptionally valuable advice to become more devout. Along the way, he regularly reminds us of God’s merciful love. Emphasizing creation, Francis urges us to see what a gift it is for us to exist. We have no right to our existence. In His mercy, God creates us. Then He mercifully redeems us from Adam’s sin, our common inheritance. Moreover, He mercifully saves us from our personal sins. Jesus gives Himself totally for us, and grafts us into His own Mystical Body. Thereby the Father adopts us as dearly beloved children, Christ becomes our brother, and the Spirit becomes our breath. No greater mercy exists.

No wonder that Francis contemplates the mystery that God adopts us to share His family life. God realizes His love for us most perfectly by making us His children. Nothing else can compare with this divine mercy. We can’t get enough of His adoption, so we spend our lives trying to cooperate with His loving mercy. God’s ever-expanding love incites us to live God’s mercy more perfectly. If we bask in the good example of Francis living God’s love to a marvelous degree, we can advance our own life. Francis applied God’s infinite mercy to everyone he met. That’s why his priestly service was so vigorous. This is how Francis became the most merciful man of his time.

With his homey examples, Francis teaches us that devotion is intense love of God. Then Francis enlivens our pictures of love, and enables us to focus more clearly on devotion. The clearer we see it, the more we want devotion. We ask: what are the practical steps to increase our devotion? Francis provides them. Facing the facts of our sins, Francis starts by urging us to confess all our mortal sins, and as many venial sins as we can recall. Then he shows us how to pray, from simple ejaculations all the way up to meditation. This simple summary of the section we reviewed is so rich that we can profit from going over it again and again. We can also read the entire book. Our summary ends with grateful thanks to God for giving us St. Francis de Sales.

**Outline of the Rest of the Devout Life**

As an encouragement to read the rest of the book, here are some highlights of the remaining 200 pages of this spiritual treasure. Approximately, each sentence in this outline describes one of the chapters. Following the 92 pages that we examined, Francis recommends five shorter kinds of prayer, which are like branches of the living prayer he described earlier. Then he shows how to examine our conscience, to keep ourselves going toward God. He recommends setting aside several days each year to devote exclusively to God. This is a retreat from daily activities to spend a honeymoon with Jesus. Naturally, some working people cannot manage such a retreat. But it is an ideal to strive for. Many groups provide facilities apart from daily life distractions. Those workers who can’t afford a retreat can sigh for the Lord, send up prayers to His heavenly throne, and dwell in His love by fostering good thoughts.

Francis tells us how to properly attend the Eucharistic sacrifice at Holy Mass. In the following chapter, he recommends reciting the Holy Office, or the psalms and prayers perfected through the centuries to foster our conversation with God. The saints give us excellent examples, as they struggle through life’s hardships to attain eternal reward, so we should honor and invoke them. Scripture supports us in our struggles, and inspires us to serve God and our neighbor. Francis provides excellent advice to profit from divine inspirations. He reminds us to confess our sins regularly, and to overcome laziness from overconfidence. In his time, daily reception of the Eucharist was not common. Francis does not condemn daily communion, nor recommend it. But he advises people to receive communion every Sunday. He devotes another chapter to proper reception of Our Lord each Sunday.

In the third part of the *Devout Life*, Francis shows how to develop virtues. He teaches us how many they are, and their relative importance. Then he examines each of the main virtues as they interact, to assist us to master them. Patience is particularly important for people living in work-a-day society. Humility is so hard to learn that he devotes four chapters to it. Meekness to combat anger requires two chapters. He provides a pearl of wisdom on prudence. His treatment of obedience is marvelously adapted to our daily world. He expounds chastity magnificently. In today’s depraved society, these two chapters on chastity are eminently appropriate. Francis devotes two sterling chapters to poverty of spirit in spite of riches. His chapter on richness of spirit in real poverty is a revelation for us, whose national gospel is prosperity. Friendship is so important that Francis devotes six chapters to this virtue. Two of them distinguish real from fake friendship.

Next is a classic account of mortification, which develops the virtue of temperance, or proper use of good creatures. Francis follows this excellent exposition with a jewel on finding solitude with God in the midst of society. A chapter on appropriate attire helps cure vanity. Devout speech with God deserves two chapters, followed by related treatments of rash judgment and slander. Because the tongue is a world of iniquity, Jas 3:6, Francis adds wise advice on proper conversation. Enjoying creatures as Jesus did is a virtue. So Francis gives us four chapters on righteous recreation. Fidelity is a vital virtue, deserving its own chapter. Francis deals discretely with desires, culminating in two magisterial chapters on marriage. Francis then describes the virtuous widow. His final chapter is a word for virgins. These chapters on virtues apply directly today, though some of the superficial social customs have changed.

Francis devotes the fourth part of this book to counsels. These prudent recommendations are perhaps the most practical of the entire volume. First, he distinguishes the children of God from the children of men. He notes that the children of men make much more noise. They insist upon imposing their false principles. So we must ignore them entirely. To resist these aggressors, we need firm courage. Courageous people stand fast in the midst of temptation, even the most seductive. So Francis considers the difference between temptation and sin, giving excellent illustrations. Because temptation is a daily hazard, he devotes eight chapters to identifying and overcoming the devil’s wiles.

Temptations rouse anxiety, so Francis shows us how to cure our worries. Our sorrow when we fall for temptation is so bitter that we can sink into despair. So he advises us to cure sorrow with holy joy. Joy naturally grows into consolations, some sensible and others spiritual. Francis helps us advance toward God with both. Without consolation, our prayer seems to be sterile. So he recommends ways to enrich prayer, to find fresh springs of consolation. He gives a remarkable example of a Benedictine novice struggling with aridity.

The fifth and final part of Francis’ book describes exercises which develop our ability to apply our actions effectively. A yearly renewal of our decisions is uniquely effective. God blesses our resolution, especially if we write it and sign it. Then we evaluate our progress toward God by comparing our resolutions to our behavior. Are we advancing toward God in the way we promised? We look carefully at our soul’s health measured by our degree of loving union with God. We measure that degree by observable service of our neighbor. Are our affections and our desires directed more to God? Following this yearly examination, we strive to reaffirm our desires for ever-more-loving union with God and neighbor. We then consider our practical resolutions. Illumined by God’s gifts, we examine the excellence of our soul. Then we consider the excellence of virtue. We seek inspiration in the example of the saints. We return to ground zero, and accept the love Jesus gives us. Christ reveals God’s eternal love for us. Finally we wrap up these exercises with our affections, our loving desire for God.

Francis finishes his book by summarizing our sentiments during this yearly review, and answering people who raise objections to the *Introduction to the Devout Life*. In light of these answers, Francis provides his last and more important counsels. He ends as he began with the fervent prayer: Live, Jesus.

May this outline of the rest of the book encourage you to read it, and profit from the lively advice that Francis gives so lovingly. He shows us how merciful he becomes by imitating Christ. We thank God for his great example.

**Appendix A**

**“An authentic Declaration to Impress on the Soul its Resolution to Serve God, and to Conclude Confession**

“I, the undersigned, standing in the presence of the eternal God, and of the whole heavenly court, having considered the immense mercy of his divine goodness toward me, a most unworthy and wretched creature, whom he has created out of nothing, preserved, supported, delivered from so many dangers, and loaded with so many benefits, and considering above all the incomprehensible sweetness and mercy with which this most good God has so graciously bourn with me in my iniquities, so frequently and so lovingly inspired and urged me to amendment, and so patiently waited for my repentance and conversion until this year of my life, notwithstanding all the ingratitude, disloyalty, and infidelity by which I have so shamelessly offended him while delaying my conversion and despising his grace; having moreover reflected that on the day of my holy baptism I was so fortunately and holily vowed and dedicated to God to be his child, and that contrary to the profession then made in my name, I have so greatly and so often, so execrably and so detestably profaned and violated my soul, applying and employing it against his Divine majesty; having now at length returned to myself, prostrate in the heart and spirit before the throne of divine justice, I acknowledge, avow, and confess myself lawfully attainted and convicted of treason against his Divine Majesty, and guilty of the death and passion of Jesus Christ because of the sins I have committed, for which sins he died and suffered the torments of the cross, so that consequently I deserve to be cast away and condemned forever.

“Turning toward the throne of the infinite mercy of this same eternal God, and having detested with my whole heart, and with my whole strength, the iniquitous deeds of my past life, I humbly ask and implore grace, and pardon, and mercy, together with complete absolution from my crime, by virtue of the death and passion of the same Lord and Redeemer of my soul. Relaying on this as on the sole foundation of my hope, I again avow and renew the sacred profession of fidelity made in my behalf at my baptism, thus renouncing the devil, the world, and the flesh, and detesting their wretched suggestions, vanities, and lusts, for the whole time of my present life, and for all eternity. Turning to my most gracious and merciful God, I desire, purpose, determine, and irrevocably resolve to serve and love him now and forever. To this end, I give and consecrate to him my mind with all its faculties, my soul with all its affections, and my body with all its senses. I protest that I will nevermore abuse any part of my being against his divine will and sovereign majesty, to which I sacrifice and immolate myself in spirit, so as to be forever his loyal, obedient, and faithful creature, without any will (intention) ever to revoke this resolution, or to repent myself of it. But if, alas, through temptation by the enemy, or human frailty, I should chance to transgress in any point, or fail to adhere to this my resolution and dedication, I protest from this moment, and am determined, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, to rise as soon as I perceive my fall, and return again to God’s mercy without any sloth or delay whatsoever.

“This is my will, my intention, and my inviolable and irrevocable resolution, which I declare and confirm without reservation or exception in God’s same sacred presence, before the eyes of the Church triumphant, and in the sight of the Church militant, my mother, who hears this my declaration in the person of him who, as her representative, hears me in this action. May it please you, O my God, eternal, almighty, and all-good, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to confirm me in this resolution, and to accept, in the odor of sweetness, this inward sacrifice of my heart. As it has pleased you to grant me the inspiration and the will to do this, so also grant me the strength and the grace needed to perform it. O my God, you are my God, the God of my heart, the God of my soul, and the God of my spirit, Ps 72:25. As such, I acknowledge and adore you now and forevermore. Live, Jesus!” Pages 72-74

End Notes

1. Pourrat 272 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Devout Life* 31 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Oevres* 3, 82-83 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Charmot 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Auman 211-212 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Bedoyere 9 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Pourrat 273 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Pourrat 274 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Pourrat 274 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Pourrat 274 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Pourrat 274 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Pourrat 274 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Pourrat 275 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Pourrat 275 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Pourrat 275 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Treatise on the Love of God*, book II, chapter 12 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Pourrat 278 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Pourrat 278 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. *Devout Life* (DL) 33 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. DL 33 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. DL 33 [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Dl 34 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. DL 37-38 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. DL 39 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. DL 39-40 [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Pourrat 272 [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. DL 41 [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. DL 41 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
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78. DL 92-93

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