
PRESENTATION SIX

Estimated Reading Time: approx. 30-60 minutes

Covenantal Love: The Unitive End of Marriage

PRESENTATION GOALS

- ☞ To help couples see that spiritual union with our Lord leads to greater union with a person's spouse, children, neighbor, etc., and that unity with God and our spouse requires a total and unreserved gift of self in order to bring forth fruit: good works, joy, perfection, new life, etc.
- ☞ To help couples discover on a deeper and more spiritual level, that marriage is the intimate, exclusive, indissoluble, communion of life and love entered by man and woman at the design of the Creator. . .for the purposes of their own good, and the procreation and education of children.
- ☞ To introduce couples to the "language/theology of the body," and how the language of the body will communicate the language of true love that is faithful, fruitful, and forever.
- ☞ To talk about the importance of prayer as an important means that contributes to the unitive dimension of marriage.

Now is the time to prepare yourself for family life. You can not follow this path if you do not know how to love. To love means to want to perfect yourself and your beloved; to overcome your selfishness and give yourself completely.” . . . To her fiancé: “My thoughts, affections, emotions and desires are turning towards you on this eve of our engagement.”¹²⁸

— St. Gianna Beretta Molla (1922–1962)

St. Gianna was talking about holiness and happiness in marriage. Holiness leads a couple to happiness. Your happiness in marriage will depend upon your holiness and if you are striving for holiness you will ultimately be happy with God forever in Heaven. There can be no happiness without holiness.

We are all destined for eternal happiness and we experience part of that happiness here on earth when we know what it means to love as God loves. To love as God loves means to imitate his only Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus, who gave himself in a complete and self-sacrificial way for our sins, draws us into union with God.

This spiritual union is best described by our Lord Jesus:

“I am the vine and you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. . . . As the Father loves me, so I also love you.”¹²⁹

“I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they may also be in us. . . . I in them and you in me, they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you have loved them even as you loved me.”¹³⁰

“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you.”¹³¹

We can see how important unity is for the sake of mission. If we are not united with our Lord Jesus here on earth, we will not be able to fulfill our mission in life, which is to get to Heaven.

Unity with God requires a total and unreserved gift of self in order to bring forth fruit: good works, joy, perfection, new life, etc: it strengthens one’s relationship with God and neighbor. If we sever ourselves from our Lord through sin, we become increasingly unhappy and miserable.

On the day of marriage, you will take each other: “In good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, until death do us part,”¹³² not until I fall out of love with you . . . or if you do this or that, I will not remain married to you. If you do not foster the call to mutual love and spiritual union with God and each other, you will begin to compartmentalize your lives (living separate lives), which will lead to a breakdown in every aspect of your marriage. Spiritual disunity in the soul is detrimental to every other aspect of life.

St. John Chrysostom, speaking on unity in marriage, suggests that young husbands should say to their wives:

I have taken you in my arms, and I love you, and I prefer you to my life itself. For the present life is nothing, and my most ardent dream is to spend it with you in such a way that we may be assured of not being separated in the life reserved for us. . . . I place your love above all things, and nothing would be more bitter or painful to me than to be of a different mind than you.¹³³

By their free gift of themselves to each other, they establish that trust, which is meant to survive the joys and sorrows of daily life. This trust enables them to grow, so that husband and wife become in a way one heart and one soul, and together attain their human fulfillment.¹³⁴

Marriage is first and foremost built upon trust. You are entrusting your entire life to your future spouse because of the profound love you have for him/her. Trust then becomes the ground for true love.

True unitive love begins when you are able to say:

- ☞ “I trust that you will love and honor me all the days of your life.”
- ☞ “I trust that you will be with me in the difficult times as well as the good times.”
- ☞ “I trust that you will never betray me in your words or actions.”
- ☞ “I trust that you will help me get to Heaven.”
- ☞ “I trust that your love for me will only grow stronger as the years go on.”

This union and covenant will bind you together for life in a relationship so close and so intimate that it will profoundly influence your whole future; a future full of joy and hope. That future, with its hopes and disappointments, its successes and its failures, its pleasures and its pains, its joys and its sorrows—is hidden from your eyes. We all know too well that these elements are mingled in every life and are to be expected in your own. And so, not knowing what is before you, you take each other for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, until death. The exchange of vows is a beautiful tribute to your undoubted faith in each other, that recognizing their full import, you are nevertheless so willing and so ready to pronounce them.¹³⁵

Please refer to the article “Healing Marriages of Control and Trust Issues” in the Appendix.

Prayer by Thomas Merton¹³⁶ on trust in his book, *Thoughts in Solitude*:

My Lord God, I do not see the road ahead of me and I cannot know for certain where it will end. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have the desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road. Therefore, I will trust you always. I will not fear for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Let us take a closer look at what our Lord has revealed to us about the unitive end of marriage.

MARRIAGE BY GOD’S DESIGN

Genesis 2: 18–24

The second creation account is filled with a wealth of knowledge about marriage. As Catholics we do not read this passage in a literalistic sense but rather focus on the spiritual senses, i.e., allegorical, anagogical, and moral. The spiritual senses enable us to probe deeper into the mystery of marital love and communion by asking some of the basic and fundamental questions: What is God trying to reveal to us about marriage in this passage? What is he trying to say to us about unity and love, communion, and covenant?

The LORD God said: “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him.” So the LORD God formed out of the ground various wild animals and various birds of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each of them would be its name. The man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of the air, and all the wild animals; but none proved to be the suitable partner for the man. So the LORD

God cast a deep sleep on the man, and while he was asleep, he took out one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. The LORD God then built up into a woman the rib that he had taken from the man. When he brought her to the man, the man said: “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; This one shall be called ‘woman,’ for out of ‘man’ this one has been taken.” That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one flesh.¹³⁷

We discover from this passage that man, although created and sustained by God, is no longer alone. Woman is created from the rib or side of Adam. This does not mean that women are somehow inferior or subordinate human beings. “We know that women are neither the slaves nor the property of men — nor vice versa. God created Eve as a partner fit for Adam, equal in dignity”¹³⁸ and heir with him to the life of grace, which forbids any right to domination or subjugation over one’s spouse.

Man is no longer alone. As soon as Adam meets Eve, Adam says with delight: “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.”¹³⁹ (I’m sure many of you men were thinking the same thing when you met your fiancé for the first time.)

This passage also reveals the fundamental belief about equality, in that each person is created equal in the eyes of God. “But equal partnership does not mean sameness. Rather it is the complementarity of man and woman that makes each of them perfectly suited to be the answer to the other’s deepest needs, to make each other complete.”¹⁴⁰

So the second creation account not only reveals God’s intention in establishing the marriage union between man and woman but also reveals the genuine one flesh union, the unitive dimension of marriage or the expression of nuptial love between husband and wife. Man is no longer alone; he has his wife as a lifelong companion, helper, and bride.

When we read this passage through a Christological lens, we get an even deeper meaning into the mystery of marital love; the mystical or intimate connection between Christ and his Bride, the Church.

“(Just as) God sent a deep sleep upon Adam, in order to fashion a wife for him from his side . . . in Christ’s case, a bride was made for him as he slept on the cross, and made from his side. With a lance his side was struck as he hung there, and out flowed the Sacraments of the Church.”¹⁴¹

When Christ was hanging from the Cross, the soldiers pierced his side with a lance and out flowed blood and water. From the rib or side of Christ came forth *blood*, which symbolizes the *Eucharist*, and *water*, which symbolizes *Baptism*. The Eucharist and Baptism are two of the three Sacraments of Initiation, Sacraments that sanctify the soul and give it new life in Christ Jesus. Just as Eve came forth from the side of her husband Adam as helper, bride, and lifelong companion, so too, what came forth from the side of Christ was his Bride, the Church, as companion, helper, and bride in the work of salvation. This is God’s “marriage” with humanity. Therefore, WE ARE NOT ALONE!

“With the first sin it was this being, whole and entire, which fell away, which was driven out of Paradise and sentenced to a bitter exile until the time of its redemption. And when Christ at last appeared, coming as ‘one bridegroom’, his bride, once again, was the whole human race.”¹⁴²

For Von Balthasar, the Church can unify and embody the world for Christ in as much as she is joined to Christ, who is himself “the whole . . . the Head of the Body and the soul which unifies it.”¹⁴³ Von Balthasar elaborates on the purpose of the Church’s nuptial union — as the consummation of the entire creation. The following is a marvelous description of Von Balthasar’s explanation of the nuptial bond of love between Christ and his Bride, the Church.

I have died once, and only once does my Body, my Church, pass over from death to life. This is the one turning. Each of your members must make it a reality in union with me, each in his own place, in his own century, but in the unity of the one change, in the transubstantiation of this world into the other world... There is but one turning wherein earth becomes heaven, and this turning point is the Church... Here the old man is replaced by the new. Here the world dies and another world rises... To you, my Church, have I entrusted this fountainhead... You yourself are the holy heart of the nations, holy because of me, but unifying the world for me, making my Blood circulate throughout the body of history. In you my redemption ripens, I myself grow to my full stature, until I, two-in-one with you, and in the bond of the two-in-one flesh—you, my Bride and my Body—will place at the feet of the Father the Kingdom which we are. The bond of our love is the meaning of the world. In it all things reach fulfillment.¹⁴⁴

We see in this beautiful description on marriage: the nuptial covenant has been ratified, the word has been made flesh in the body of the bride, their marriage has been consummated on the Cross, and its procreative purpose is already unfolding in the weary world as humanity is gathered, more and more, into Christ's nuptial embrace of his Church.¹⁴⁵

From this explanation of the nuptial bond of love between Christ and the Church, Genesis reveals:

- ☞ Complementarity of the sexes
“God made them male and female”
- ☞ Intimate Communion
“It is not good for man to be alone”
- ☞ Exclusive
“This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.”
- ☞ For the good of each other
“This one shall be called ‘woman,’ for out of ‘man’ this one has been taken.”
- ☞ For life/love—the one flesh union
“This is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and the two of them become one flesh.” The one flesh union of husband and wife mirrors Christ's covenantal love for his Bride, the Church; a love that is fruitful, faithful, and forever.

So the Church teaches...

Marriage is the intimate, exclusive, indissoluble, communion of life and love entered by man and woman at the design of the Creator... for the purposes of their own good, and the procreation and education of children: this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a Sacrament.¹⁴⁶

In St. Matthew's Gospel, Jesus reaffirms what was revealed in the beginning:

Jesus said, “Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator made them male and female and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and

the two shall become one flesh?’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate.” (19: 4–6)

“The two shall become one flesh.”

What does this mean for you in marriage? What is required of you in marriage?

We know from the writings of St. John Paul II on the Theology of the Body that the nuptial meaning of the body means that a man and a woman are not made for themselves but for each other. . . . The nuptial meaning of the body reveals the true nature of marriage: a relationship of complete mutual self-donation. Husband and wife give themselves to each other body and soul, physically and spiritually, where the two become one flesh. You will no longer live for yourselves, but for each other.¹⁴⁷

When we think of the word ‘theology,’ we think of the study of God or abstract ideas about God. But theology not only deals with our questions about God, it deals mainly with God’s word to us — that is, the way He talks with us and tells us about Himself and His love for us. For theology, the Incarnation is central. In this event, God Himself comes to meet us and becomes visible by assuming a human body. Consequently, the body enters into the realm of theology. When the Word became flesh, God made clear to us that the body has a language able to talk about God and about the way He calls us to love Him and each other.¹⁴⁸

We hear in Scripture how God unites himself with us in our human nature: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us”¹⁴⁹; “he emptied himself and took the form of slave being born in the likeness of men.”¹⁵⁰ God becomes one like us in all things but sin in order to unite us to God and show us what it means to live in communion with him and each other. This happens most intimately in the marriage covenant.

The unitive end of marriage (mutual expression of love) means that you will be able to express your entire self to your spouse. This is one of the ends for which marriage was created by God: to build up the spouses in love. Every action we do or word we speak has an end . . . it has a purpose, whether good or evil.

St. Teresa of Calcutta (Mother Teresa) once said to a reporter, who was praising her for her work of alleviating poverty and hunger, “that we do not just feed the poor to alleviate their hunger, we feed them and care for them so as to satiate the hunger and thirst of Christ on the Cross; to satiate their hunger and thirst for God.” As Christians we don’t just feed the poor to alleviate their physical hunger, whenever we assist those in need, we love and serve Christ as the final end of our work. When we serve others, we serve Christ.

God created marriage with a specific purpose and an end. He created it as a path to unite you with himself, with your future spouse, and from that union to bring forth new human life.

So, “The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring.”¹⁵¹

Marriage therefore has a dual purpose: love and life.

Thus, “the married couples form the intimate partnership of life and love established by the Creator and governed by his laws; it is rooted in the conjugal covenant, that is, in their irrevocable personal consent. Both give themselves definitively and totally to one another. They are no longer two; from now on they form one flesh. . . . The conjugal love of man and woman thus stands under the twofold obligation of fidelity and fecundity.”¹⁵²

During this seminar you learned about the Sacrament of Matrimony, a Sacrament being a visible sign of an invisible reality, instituted by Christ to convey grace for our salvation.

Just as I know that your soul is present because of your body, so marriage is the visible sign of the marriage of Christ and his Church.

In a similar way, your love must be “visible.” You probably already express your love by giving each other a kiss, by speaking words of affection, for example, “I love you,” or “I’m sorry,” by encouraging each other when things are not going so well, complimenting one another, and praying with each other.

Marriage requires these things and many more, such as bringing home flowers, remembering anniversaries, birthdays, etc.

However, the most profound expression of love that God bestows upon a husband and wife is...? The conjugal love act. It is what people commonly refer to as “sex,” but “sex” is such an insufficient word to describe the amazing depth of meaning that is involved. “Sex” is really the little box you check on a form that indicates male or female. A better term would be the “conjugal love act” or the “one flesh union” as described in Genesis.

The conjugal love act can also be referred to as an expression of the body or “the language of the body.”

Through your body, your soul expresses and communicates itself. We are all material and spiritual beings. “The body is animated (vivified, made alive) by the soul. This is an essential aspect of the person. The body then is the material expression of the soul.”¹⁵³

For example, if you are not in the state of sanctifying grace, i.e., in right relationship with God, your actions will show it. Most Christians who truly know what it means to love and are living lives of holiness rooted in Christ, are genuinely charitable, kind, generous, patient, etc., these virtues are all expressions of the state of the soul.

On a more practical level in marriage, the kiss, the gentle touch, and a hug are all body language. But, in the conjugal love act, you will speak the language of your wedding vows. On the day you get married, through your vows you will give yourself to your spouse one hundred percent. You will say, “I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad.” Or in other words, “I give you my life, my whole self... spiritually, emotionally, physically, and, yes, my fertility.”

On the night of your wedding, when you come together, you in effect are saying “let me express my vows to you” by giving myself completely to you one hundred percent.

So in the language of the body, the conjugal love act is a renewal of your wedding vows.

What about sex before marriage? What about cohabitation?

Please see articles “Cohabitation” and “Why Isn’t It Good to Live Together Before Marriage?” in the Appendix.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says that, “out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, unchastity [fornication]... These are what defile a person.”¹⁵⁴ St. Paul asserts, “But whoever is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Avoid immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body; but the immoral person sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been purchased at a price. Therefore, glorify God in your body.”¹⁵⁵

“The Apostle points out the specifically Christian motive for practicing chastity, when he condemns the sin of fornication not only in the measure that this action is injurious to one’s neighbor or to the social

order but because the fornicator offends against Christ who has redeemed him with his blood and of whom he is a member, and against the Holy Spirit of whom he is a temple.”¹⁵⁶

“This is the will of God, your holiness: that you refrain from immorality, that each of you know how to acquire a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in lustful passion. . . . For God did not call us to impurity but to holiness. Therefore, whoever disregards this, disregards not a human being but God, who [also] gives his Holy Spirit to you.”¹⁵⁷

“Fornication (sexual intercourse between unmarried persons) is sinful because it violates the dignity of persons and the nuptial meaning and purpose of sexuality, which is ordered only to the unitive and procreative goals of married people.”¹⁵⁸

A man and a woman who do so are, *most of the time*, in effect saying to each other with the language of their bodies “I give myself totally to you . . . except . . . my fertility.”

Conjugal love requires that man and woman are bound in the covenant of marriage before God. Only then can they express and renew the vows they have made to each other before God on their wedding day.

Consider Mary and Joseph at the time of their betrothal. They took it very seriously because it was an extremely sacred time. Engagement is a time for deepening your love for each other. “When God says, Thou shalt not, He is not trying to take all the fun out of life. He is trying to save us from actions that will harm us, that will distort our natures that will inevitably make us profoundly unhappy.”¹⁵⁹

When we go against God’s commandments, we find ourselves “out of union with God” and in reality, out of true and authentic union with each other. Ultimately, we find ourselves in an unhappy and miserable state. The shame a couple feels, who is having premarital sex, is no different than what Adam and Eve experienced in the garden after the Fall.

C. S. Lewis wrote *The Screwtape Letters*, which is a work of Christian satire. The story takes the form of a series of letters from a senior demon, Screwtape, to his nephew, a junior tempter named Wormwood, so as to advise him on methods of securing the damnation of an earthly man, known as “the Patient.” One of the main goals of the senior and junior devils is to deceive humanity and tempt us to separate God-given pleasure from its ultimate end, so that pleasure becomes an end in itself without any reference to the Creator of all things.

The Church has always taught, “The acts in marriage by which the intimate and chaste union of the spouses takes place are noble and honorable; the truly human performance of these acts fosters the self-giving they signify and enriches the spouses in joy and gratitude. Sexuality is a source of joy and pleasure . . . nevertheless, the spouses’ union achieves the twofold end of marriage: the good of the spouses themselves and the transmission of life.”¹⁶⁰

Sexual intercourse outside of marriage may seem fun and pleasurable, it may even seem to bring you closer. But it’s really a sham. Deep down in our hearts we really know that. It’s the pleasure without the commitment, the attempt to feel oneness without the vow that makes you one.¹⁶¹

What if you’ve already gone down that road? Well, whether you call them mistakes or sins, we all make wrong decisions. To be a Christian is not to be perfect all the time. It is falling and, with the help of God’s grace, getting up—over and over again, if necessary. If you have already engaged in intimate contact, it’s not too late. Many people are now discovering the beauty of what is called “secondary chastity,” [before the wedding] that is, striving anew to live lives of abstinence from sexual intimacy. Of course, it isn’t easy. Those bodily urges are still in the picture. It will

be necessary to avoid temptations, like being alone together in certain situations. It will require changing some of the patterns of relating to each other in physical ways. It will require real self-sacrifice, but it will be a great preparation for the self-sacrifices that will be needed in marriage. It's also a great preparation for withstanding temptations to infidelity that may come along later. What a wonderful wedding gift for an engaged couple to give each other: to recommit themselves to sexual purity for the sake of their love for each other!¹⁶²

“Those who are engaged to marry are called to live chastity in continence. They should see in this time of testing a discovery of mutual respect, an apprenticeship in fidelity, and the hope of receiving one another from God. They should reserve for marriage the expressions of affection that belong to married love. They will help each other grow in chastity.”¹⁶³

“Chastity means the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being. Sexuality, in which man's belonging to the bodily and biological world is expressed, becomes personal and truly human when it is integrated into the relationship of one person to another, in the complete and lifelong mutual gift of a man and a woman. The virtue of chastity therefore involves the integrity of the person and the integrality of the gift.”¹⁶⁴

“Chastity is a moral virtue. It is also a gift from God, a grace, a fruit of spiritual effort. The Holy Spirit enables one whom the water of Baptism has regenerated to imitate the purity of Christ.”¹⁶⁵

St. Teresa of Calcutta (Mother Teresa) addressed these words to engaged couples: “You are the future of family life. You are the future of the joy of loving. You are the future of making your life something beautiful for God . . . a pure love. That you love a girl or that you love a boy is beautiful, but don't spoil it, don't destroy it. Keep it pure. Keep your love virgin so that on the day of your marriage you can give something beautiful to each other . . . the joy of a pure love.”

This concludes the first part (the unitive) on the ends of marriage. Before we begin the presentation on the procreative end of marriage, here is some practical advice from Dr. William White, a family physician and father of seven.

In regards to the unitive end of marriage: “You will no longer live for yourselves but for each other. This self-surrender is far from easy. You will be called upon to give more of yourself than you could have imagined you are capable of giving. You will find yourselves stretched, pulled, and expanded in new and unexpected ways. If you respond with love to every demand, trial, and crisis in your marriage, you will grow more mature, more generous, more patient, more kind, and more selfless. You will be practicing a love that will change you into a new person who will be capable of living an eternity of love. That's what the family is for—to prepare husbands, wives, and children for Heaven.

“Now some people might say that the sacrifice is too great, that no one can just give and give and give. But I'm sure you have heard, ‘It is in giving that we receive.’ In giving more than we ever thought we could, we receive more reward than we could have imagine. Marriage is, in fact, the only vocation that promises a measure of happiness, even a foretaste of heaven, on this earth.”¹⁶⁶

Take a five minute break and make note of two things you learned from this section.

WHAT IS CHRISTIAN PRAYER?

Many couples find a deep intimacy in praying together. Couples have told me that, “Hearing my future spouse pray with me is very powerful.” Some have even said that,

Outside of the conjugal love act, there is nothing more intimate than prayer.

This is a popular reading used at weddings.

Tobiah arose from bed and said to his wife, “My love, get up. Let us pray and beg our Lord to have mercy on us and to grant us deliverance.” She got up, and they started to pray and beg that deliverance might be theirs. He began with these words: “Blessed are you, O God of our fathers; praised be your name forever and ever. Let the heavens and all your creation praise you forever. You made Adam and you gave him his wife Eve to be his help and support; and from these two the human race descended. You said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone; let us make him a partner like himself.’ Now, Lord, you know that I take this wife of mine not because of lust, but for a noble purpose. Call down your mercy on me and on her, and allow us to live together to a happy old age.” They said together, “Amen, amen,” and went to bed for the night. (Tb 8:4–9)

“My husband and I write to you during our honeymoon from the terrace of an Italian-style villa in California’s wine country. We have just prayed the *Magnificat* Prayer for the Morning and the Meditation of the Day. Praying together has been one of the most important and intimate elements of our sixteen-month courtship. Over our first days and weeks together, I invited my now husband to pray with me. Looking back, he says *Magnificat* led him to rediscover a desire for and a delight in, prayer, which he had lost through a highly secularized young adulthood. We are now both big fans of *Magnificat*! Thank you for making possible a daily rhythm of prayer for courting and married couples like us.”

—Subscribers to *Magnificat* Magazine

For more information about the *Magnificat* prayer booklet, visit their website at www.magnificat.com.

The following text is taken from the Catechism of the Catholic Church

“For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.”¹⁶⁷

“Prayer is the raising of one’s mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God.” But when we pray, do we speak from the height of our pride and will, or “out of the depths” of a humble and contrite heart? He who humbles himself will be exalted; *humility* is the foundation

of prayer. Only when we humbly acknowledge that “we do not know how to pray as we ought,” are we ready to receive freely the gift of prayer. “Man is a beggar before God.”

Where does prayer come from? Whether prayer is expressed in words or gestures, it is the whole man who prays. But in naming the source of prayer, Scripture speaks sometimes of the soul or the spirit, but most often of the heart (more than a thousand times). According to Scripture, it is the *heart* that prays. If our heart is far from God, the words of prayer are in vain.

The heart is the dwelling-place where I am, where I live; according to the Semitic or Biblical expression, the heart is the place “to which I withdraw.” The heart is our hidden center, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others; only the Spirit of God can fathom the human heart and know it fully. The heart is the place of decision, deeper than our psychic drives. It is the place of truth, where we choose life or death. It is the place of encounter, because as image of God we live in relation: it is the place of covenant.

Christian prayer is a covenant relationship between God and man in Christ. It is the action of God and of man, springing forth from both the Holy Spirit and ourselves, wholly directed to the Father, in union with the human will of the Son of God made man.

Prayer is the life of the new heart. It ought to animate us at every moment. But we tend to forget him who is our life and our all. This is why the Fathers of the spiritual life in the Deuteronomic and prophetic traditions insist that prayer is a remembrance of God often awakened by the memory of the heart: “We must remember God more often than we draw breath.” But we cannot pray “at all times” if we do not pray at specific times, consciously willing it. These are the special times of Christian prayer, both in intensity and duration.¹⁶⁸

Expressions of Prayers

I. Vocal Prayer

Through his Word, God speaks to man. By words, mental or vocal, our prayer takes flesh. Yet it is most important that the heart should be present to him to whom we are speaking in prayer:¹⁶⁹ “Whether or not our prayer is heard depends not on the number of words, but on the fervor of our souls.”¹⁷⁰

II. Meditation

Meditation is above all a quest. The mind seeks to understand the why and how of the Christian life, in order to adhere and respond to what the Lord is asking. The required attentiveness is difficult to sustain. We are usually helped by books, and Christians do not want for them: the Sacred Scriptures, particularly the Gospels, holy icons, liturgical texts of the day or season, writings of the spiritual fathers, works of spirituality, the great book of creation, and that of history—the page on which the “today” of God is written.

To meditate on what we read helps us to make it our own by confronting it with ourselves. Here, another book is opened: the book of life. We pass from thoughts to reality. To the extent that we are humble and faithful, we discover in meditation the movements that stir the heart and we are

able to discern them. It is a question of acting truthfully in order to come into the light: “Lord, what do you want me to do?”

There are as many and varied methods of meditation as there are spiritual masters. Christians owe it to themselves to develop the desire to meditate regularly, lest they come to resemble the three first kinds of soil in the parable of the sower. But a method is only a guide; the important thing is to advance, with the Holy Spirit, along the one way of prayer: Christ Jesus.

Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion, and desire. This mobilization of faculties is necessary in order to deepen our convictions of faith, prompt the conversion of our heart, and strengthen our will to follow Christ. Christian prayer tries above all to meditate on the mysteries of Christ, as in *lectio divina* or the Rosary. This form of prayerful reflection is of great value, but Christian prayer should go further: to the knowledge of the love of the Lord Jesus, to union with him.¹⁷¹

III. Contemplative Prayer

What is contemplative prayer? St. Teresa answers: “Contemplative prayer [*oración mental*] in my opinion is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us.”¹⁷² Contemplative prayer seeks him “whom my soul loves.”¹⁷³ It is Jesus, and in him, the Father. We seek him, because to desire him is always the beginning of love, and we seek him in that pure faith which causes us to be born of him and to live in him. In this inner prayer we can still meditate, but our attention is fixed on the Lord himself.

The choice of the *time and duration of the prayer* arises from a determined will, revealing the secrets of the heart. One does not undertake contemplative prayer only when one has the time: one makes time for the Lord, with the firm determination not to give up, no matter what trials and dryness one may encounter. One cannot always meditate, but one can always enter into inner prayer, independently of the conditions of health, work, or emotional state. The heart is the place of this quest and encounter, in poverty and in faith.

Entering into contemplative prayer is like entering into the Eucharistic liturgy: we “gather up” the heart, recollect our whole being under the prompting of the Holy Spirit, abide in the dwelling place of the Lord which we are, awaken our faith in order to enter into the presence of him who awaits us. We let our masks fall and turn our hearts back to the Lord who loves us, so as to hand ourselves over to him as an offering to be purified and transformed.

Contemplative prayer is the prayer of the child of God, of the forgiven sinner who agrees to welcome the love by which he is loved and who wants to respond to it by loving even more. But he knows that the love he is returning is poured out by the Spirit in his heart, for everything is grace from God. Contemplative prayer is the poor and humble surrender to the loving will of the Father in ever deeper union with his beloved Son.

Contemplative prayer is the simplest expression of the mystery of prayer. It is a *gift*, a grace; it can be accepted only in humility and poverty. Contemplative prayer is a *covenant* relationship established by God within our hearts. Contemplative prayer is a *communion* in which the Holy Trinity conforms man, the image of God, “to his likeness.”¹⁷⁴

Take a five minute break and make note of two things you learned from this presentation.

Please move on to reading the next PDF **Presentation 7 within Module TWO. The Microsoft Form link is located at the end of Presentation 7 which is a combined questionnaire that covers both presentation readings of 6 & 7.**

Recommended Books on Prayer:

Deep Conversion/Deep Prayer. Fr. Thomas Dubay, SM (www.ignatius.com)

Overcoming Lukewarmness: Healing Your Soul's Sadness. Francisco Fernandez-Carvajal (www.scepterpublishers.org)

In Conversation with God. Francis Fernandez (www.scepterpublishers.org)