

Your Personal Apostolate:

Accepting and Sharing
the Love of God



Michele Elena Bondi

Not sure what God has
in store for you?
His plans are wondrous,
loving, and beautiful.
Accept Him, seek Him, love Him,
and share His love
with those around you.
Prepare to be amazed, for
God is at work in you!

The Author's Personal Apostolate

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This book is dedicated to
Jesus
and was written for
You.



May every soul seek
to accept, return, and share
The Love of God,
which is
all encompassing,
never ending,
and
can never be contained.

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*When the Pharisees heard
that he had silenced the Sadducees,
they gathered together, and one of them,
a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.
“Teacher, which commandment in the law
is the greatest?”
He said to him,
“‘You shall love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’
This is the greatest and first commandment.
And a second is like it:
‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’
On these two commandments
hang all the law and the prophets.”
—Matthew 22:34-40*

Foreword

Each of us has a unique personal apostolate whose genesis is God's Love. All that we are and all that we possess comes from God. Thus, all that we give is an extension of His immense love. As instruments of God, we must strive to be holy as we cultivate and nurture our personal apostolate and give of ourselves throughout our lives in loving service. Our efforts to accept, return, and share God's Love are crucial to the formation and fulfillment of our life's work.

As stated by St. Thérèse of Lisieux, "God has no need for anyone to carry out His work, I know, but just as He allows a clever gardener to raise rare and delicate plants, giving him the necessary knowledge for this while reserving to Himself the care of making them fruitful, so Jesus wills to be helped in His divine cultivation of souls."¹

God's Plans are awesome and wondrous, and include each one of us! May we approach our personal apostolate with tremendous excitement and great joy, relying on His strength and guidance always.

*"Truly I tell you,
just as you did it to one of the least of these
who are members of my family,
you did it to me."
—Matthew 25:40*

¹ St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, p. 113

CHAPTER ONE

WE ARE LOVED



Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

—1 John 4: 7-12

Can you remember a time when someone did something that made you feel special? Perhaps you received a surprise compliment, were recognized for something you did, or a person gifted you with something you wanted. Reflect on how that gesture made you feel. Perhaps you felt joy, acceptance, approval, appreciation, validation, or closeness to the giver. Perhaps you felt the desire to reciprocate in some way.

Now reflect on how it feels to know that all that you are and everything you have was given to you by God. Keep in mind that the genesis of all He does is His great love for us. Hopefully this awareness causes you to feel joy, acceptance, approval, appreciation, validation, and closeness to God. Certainly if we recognize love shown to us by other people, we should also recognize God in every loving gesture, for He is the original source of every act of love.

You are very, very special to God. Have you ever heard the expression that God is never outdone in generosity? That is true, because all things seen and unseen come from Him. God constantly communicates with us and affirms us in many ways. He wants us all to feel loved, valued, and wanted, because He loves, values, and wants us! He is the one who gave us our very first gift: the gift of life.

Just think, God created each one of us uniquely, out of love alone. After creating us, He continually bestows His love upon us and remains with us each and every day throughout our lives. God demonstrates His loving presence in countless ways, continuously communicating with us and beckoning us into a relationship with Him. His method of communication

varies depending on the situation. God may be profound or simple, humorous or serious. He is very symbolic and unfathomably loving. His infinite love is reflected in everything He does! Consider just a few of the many ways God shows you His love each day.

In very basic terms, God loves each one of us directly and indirectly. At times He chooses to communicate with us directly, one-on-one. Often He communicates with us indirectly, through something or someone. For example, God's love can be detected through the use of our senses in the world He created. Think of seeing beautiful flowers or enjoying the taste of your favorite food. God also loves us through the events and circumstances in our lives, beckoning us throughout every situation to draw closer to Him.

Perhaps the sweetest of ways God loves us indirectly is through other people. Have you ever received a supportive phone call or an offer of help just when you needed one? Remember when someone was kind to you? That was God loving you through other people. Have you ever felt inspired to do something for someone else? That was God loving through you!

God designed a very special unit in which He wants each person to experience the joy of being loved, valued, and wanted. This unit is the family. Family members are mutually responsible for giving His love to and receiving His love from one another. God's love for us should find its first expression within our families. This is where each personal apostolate begins and is initially shaped.

Parents and caregivers have a vital apostolate as providers of

love to those God placed in their care. They have a tremendous responsibility to be faithful to their vocation as His instruments of love. Likewise, every family member is responsible for sharing and accepting God's love. In this seemingly ordinary giving and receiving of love, we come to see God in one another. May we ask Him regularly to aid us in the vital work of sharing His love with those in our family.

Perhaps you received God's love from the people in your family, or from some of the people in your family. Perhaps you did not receive the nurturing and love God meant for you to have from those closest to you. Rest assured that even before your family or any other person knew you, God knew you. God has loved you, God loves you right now, and God will always love you!

Sometimes accepting God's love, loving Him in return, and sharing His love with others are not easy. We can be hurt by the actions of other people or by certain events in our lives. Sometimes we are hurt by the effect our own choices have had on ourselves and on other people. Fortunately God has the power to heal our past hurts, disappointments, and failures, and He respectfully awaits our permission to purify, heal, and strengthen us.

When we acknowledge and accept His love, and ask for and accept His healing and forgiveness, He liberates us so we can proceed unrestrained, with hope and joy. With our approval, He works in us and through us. God provides the healing, courage, and strength to forgive ourselves and others, and He is constantly loving and forgiving us. When we place ourselves at God's service, miracles happen. We

become more willing to accept love and to love in return. How beautiful!

Perhaps you are ready to embark upon the greatest and most important relationship of your life: your relationship with God. Maybe you have already taken that step and now aspire to deepen your relationship with Him. The contents of each chapter in this book are structured around one basic theme: Your life has great purpose, and accepting, returning, and sharing God's love are crucial to the development and fulfillment of that purpose. Your purpose is your personal apostolate. The goal of this book is to provide you with an understanding of how crucial the love of God is to your existence and assist you as you discern the will of God throughout your life. "If you live for Christ, not the slightest moment of your life goes to waste."²

This first chapter acknowledges that we are loved by God. In the following chapters we will contemplate accepting His love and loving Him in return. Finally, we will be challenged to be instruments of God's love. Hopefully God's great love for every one of us will resonate on every page. Let us ask God for a greater awareness of the many ways that He loves us, invites us into a more intimate relationship with Him, rejoices when we love Him back, and encourages us to share His great love with others.

2 Fulton J. Sheen, *Our Grounds for Hope*, p. 36

WE ARE LOVED: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

A personal reflection of mine concludes each chapter. Perhaps you will recognize some of your own triumphs and struggles in my reflections, or know of someone with a similar story to tell. While each person is a unique gift to the world with individual experiences, we all have a great deal in common. Most importantly, we have God in common! We are all loved unconditionally by Him, and each of us has a personal apostolate through which we share His love with one another.

Great things are accomplished through the power of God's love. Hopefully my personal reflections will be thought provoking for you as you conclude each chapter. They are followed by questions for you to consider. I invite you to ponder the questions and apply your responses to the main idea of each chapter. Hopefully your insights will be beneficial to your relationship with God as you define and develop your walk with Christ.

My nuclear family is close and somewhat smaller in size, while my much larger extended family spans across several continents. I was married and abundantly blessed with three extraordinary children, two sons and a daughter. I am very grateful for having experienced the love of God and the love of many people in my life. God has been exceedingly generous with me and has persevered in His work with me. My life is very joyful and full.

My personal history includes great trials as well as many triumphs. When I was seventeen my father died of a heart attack. He was forty-six. Twelve years later my first child was born with a severe food allergy. He was in agony for five months as we sought an accurate diagnosis. A severe allergy to milk had

caused bleeding ulcers in his intestines. For two years he could not eat anything containing milk. As his nursing mother, I also had to eliminate all milk products from my diet. I remained on the elimination diet while nursing three children over the course of six years.

Before my children were born I began working on a Ph.D. in Psychology. I already had a Masters Degree and was eager to complete my doctorate and focus on my greatly anticipated apostolate of motherhood. After all the other requirements were complete, I began work on the final one, my dissertation, but encountered resistance from my advisor. The resistance continued through the arrivals of my three children. I switched advisors but my former advisor was a permanent member of my committee, and his resistance continued. He created extra tasks not required of others that seemed impossible for me to meet. I completed every one.

Finally, I was allowed to present my dissertation proposal and it was accepted. However, that afternoon my advisor called to inform me that there had been personal infighting within my committee and several members reversed their decision to accept my work. At that moment I was unjustifiably stopped from obtaining my Ph.D. Even with a justifiable reason, I still had a one-year grace period left to complete the final requirement to everyone's satisfaction. When I brought that to the attention of my department, the grace period was denied me as well, and no formal reason was ever given for that decision, either.

When all was said and done, I was denied the doctorate I had earned because several members of the department did not like one another. While I had heard of this happening before, I never thought that would happen to me. After years of study and the cost

of tuition, after having passed first-year exams, earned a scholarship, passed written and oral qualifying exams, and completed my dissertation proposal, the unthinkable had happened! I was in shock, I was angry, but mostly I was extremely frustrated.

Certainly the unfairness was very difficult to take. The university's ombudsman said there was nothing he could do. Not only had plans years in the making abruptly changed, but I was terribly wronged in the process. Despite my best efforts, things had not worked out the way I had planned. One day the Holy Spirit inspired my sister to tell me that the only possible explanation was that for some reason, God had allowed the injustice. That was my first major confrontation with the Will of God versus the will of Michele. Resignation was not even a word in my vocabulary!

I could not have even imagined what was to come next. A month after receiving the final word regarding my degree, the world as I knew it ended when my children and I stopped by the mailbox on our way to the store. I had been served with divorce documents; the papers had been filed on my birthday. Eighteen months later the marriage that was to last a lifetime officially ended. Before, during, and after the divorce, my children and I were relentlessly persecuted for seven years.

Just like Jesus' Crucifixion was followed by His Glorious Resurrection, my suffering led to great personal triumph. I was granted the tremendous grace of an unwavering faith and constant trust in God through many bleak moments. Nevertheless, the pain was very real. God did not take away my pain and for good reason, for it was during my trials that I experienced remarkable spiritual and personal growth that I know would not otherwise have been possible. God was always present—loving, comforting, helping, teaching, and guiding me.

During that great trial, God very tenderly beckoned me into a deeper personal relationship with Him. Note that His most profound invitations did not come when things in my life were going well. Through frequent reception of the Eucharist, regular Reconciliation, Eucharistic Adoration, and prayer, God provided me the strength to get through each day, grieve, forgive, consider a different path, become excited about the future, recapture joy, and embrace my evolving apostolate. How crucial it is to remember not to discard our faith when we need God the most! We must persevere and not abandon Him during trials, for He remains with us and He has important plans for us.

One particularly difficult day, I went into church to pray about my continuing hardships, and immediately I was assured, “Your prayers are working.” That revelation from a compassionate God who shared my pain helped me to continue trusting in Him and to remain faithful. While it took years for me to see great proof through my eyes that my prayers were working, the work was indeed in progress, and He clearly manifested Himself in countless delightful ways. We must remember that God knows and sees things that we do not. Through it all, He has taken very good care of my children and me, especially when we needed Him the most.

WE ARE LOVED: FOR THE READER

- † Think of some ways you have received love from other people.
- † What have you done for other people to make them feel loved?
- † How has God loved you directly, through your senses, or through circumstances in your life?
- † How has God loved you through other people?
- † What are some of the sweetest ways He has shown His love for you?
- † What actions have you taken to love Him in return?

Dear Lord,

Thank You for loving me
in so many different ways,
directly and indirectly,
through senses and circumstances.

I also thank You
for loving me
through the people You put in my life
to love me in Your place.

I love you back!

Amen.

CHAPTER TWO

FOLLOWING THE HOLY FAMILY



Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

—Matthew 1:18-25

God in His Goodness never abandons us as we tend to our responsibilities. Not only is He always present, He has given us wonderful role models to follow in the Holy Family. Through the examples of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, we learn much about what it means to live one's life with great love. The Holy Family experienced both the joys and hardships of life in this world. Imagine the joy Joseph and Mary felt as Jesus, the long awaited Savior of Mankind, lived among them as a part of their family! Imagine that they held the infant God, Creator of the Universe, as a humble baby in their arms.

The Holy Family also suffered tremendously during their lives, and we learn much when we study how they behaved during trials. We know from Bible accounts that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph did not live a carefree life up to the time of Jesus' Crucifixion. Rather, they endured many hardships, including poverty, pain, sorrow, relocation, threats to safety, deception, temptation, mistreatment, rejection, abandonment, fatigue, uncertainty, physical discomforts, persecution, cruelty, hostility, unfairness, and personal loss.

Like us, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph each had a personal apostolate. The Holy Family allowed God to work through them and remained faithful to Him through joys *and* difficulties. They agreed to be instruments of God's great love. Every person ever created is a beneficiary of the love of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph because they chose to embrace their personal apostolate unconditionally. God's plan of redemption came to fruition because the Holy Family cooperated with Him in good times and in times of suffering. What a powerful statement to

ponder when we are tempted to view suffering as worthless and something always to be avoided! Let us consider some events from the lives of the Holy Family.

In a tremendous expression of faith, Mary gave her consent to becoming the Mother of Jesus (Luke 1:38). In his first encyclical letter, Pope Benedict XVI explained, “Mary’s greatness consists in the fact that she wants to magnify God, not herself...She knows that she will only contribute to the salvation of the world if, rather than carrying out her own projects, she places herself completely at the disposal of God’s initiatives.”³ For his part, Joseph trusted in God, despite not knowing the circumstances of Mary’s pregnancy (Matthew 1:18-21). God ordained that His Son Jesus be born into poverty (2 Corinthians 8:9; Luke 2:7), which meant a life of poverty for Mary and Joseph. Imagine how Joseph suffered as he tried in vain to find suitable shelter for Mary to deliver the Son of God into the world, “*because there was no place for them in the inn*” (Luke 2:7).

Jesus shed His Precious Blood for the first time as an infant at His circumcision (Luke 2:21). Mary and Joseph were compliant in presenting Jesus in the Temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:22), and were sorrowful at the prophesy of Simeon who stated, “*This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too*” (Luke 2:34-35).

Upon God’s instruction, the Holy Family fled their home and relocated to a foreign land because Herod sought to kill the child Jesus (Matthew 2:13-15). Later they obediently returned

3 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (“God Is Love”), #41

to Nazareth (Matthew 2:19-23). Jesus wept at the death of His friend Lazarus (John 11:33-35) and later for the people of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44). During Jesus' public ministry, learned men tried to trick Him with words (Luke 11:53-54) and also conspired against Him (Luke 20:20). Jesus was tempted by the devil (Luke 4:1-2; Luke 4:13) and betrayed by one of His apostles for thirty pieces of silver (Matthew 26:14-16).

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus became sorrowful and troubled (Matthew 26:36-37). "...He now sensed guilt to such an extent that it forced Blood from His Body, Blood which fell like crimson beads upon the olive roots of Gethsemane, making the first Rosary of Redemption."⁴ *"And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.'"* (Matthew 26:39). He was arrested and led away by armed soldiers and officers (Mark 14:43-46; John 18:12), forced to stand trial (Matthew 27:11-14), and condemned to death (Luke 23: 23-25). Imagine the sorrow of His loving Mother as she witnessed the cruelty her beloved Son took upon Himself to satisfy Divine Justice and merit our redemption. *"Then they spat in his face and struck him; and some slapped him, saying, 'Prophecy to us, you Messiah! Who is it that struck you?'"* (Matthew 26:67-68).

"And they clothed Him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. And they began saluting him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out

4 Fulton J. Sheen, *The Life of Christ*, p. 321-322

to crucify him” (Mark 15:17-20). “And carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them” (John 19:17-18).

Jesus was rejected by many people, among them some of His closest followers (Mark 14:66-72). John was the only Apostle present at the foot of the Cross. As Innocence hung crucified, soldiers divided the garments of their Savior by casting lots (Matthew 27:35). Others mocked Him (Matthew 27:39-44). Jesus responded by forgiving everyone (Luke 23:34). Jesus’ apostolate is our perfect example of a life lived in loving obedience to God the Father.

By imitating Jesus, we will one day merit the joy of His Eternal Presence in heaven. His passion and death culminated in the greatest act of love mankind has ever known. Jesus’ personal apostolate was one of great love! Consider that the people of Jesus’ time did not have the benefit of knowing how the events of their time would play out. The members of the Holy Family were obedient, though doing what God asked did not always make sense to them. They were obedient when the outcomes of their efforts were not guaranteed in advance.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were obedient to God even when they knew that their obedience would lead to great personal suffering. What faith, what courage! Their courage and strength came from God. We should strive for obedience and holiness in our lives, even when we do not understand God’s Plan. May we wisely seek to imitate the love, faith, sanctity, courage, and obedience of the Holy Family.

FOLLOWING THE HOLY FAMILY: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

When our boys were young, my former husband and I decided to build a new home. Tremendous amounts of time and physical labor went into the building process. We had faith that our efforts would bring our family a lifetime of joy. In contrast, putting time and effort into our relationship with God yields an eternity of joy. Such long-lasting benefits are definitely worth working for!

Oftentimes we are disappointed, angered, frustrated, sometimes pleasantly surprised, but more often stunned and devastated when things do not work out according to our plans, despite our efforts and good intentions. The unexpected events that occurred during the building of our home provide an example of the contrast of laboring for that which is of this world versus laboring for that which is eternal. Before our house was completed, we discovered that we were expecting our third child. We would have preferred that our home be finished before having another baby, but were open to life. We were in our early thirties and in my mind still had plenty of time to have more children.

This baby seemed to be arriving too early. I had my plan while God had His plan. Guess whose plan was better? The happy family living in the beautiful home was not to be. Shortly after we moved in, the marriage that was to be forever ended and our home went up for sale. So many hopes and dreams were shattered at the same time. Two years later the home we worked so hard to build was sold to someone who sought to take advantage of our sorrowful situation.

In fact, so many people appeared on the scene to take advantage of us it was reminiscent of Christ's Passion. Many times my feelings of despair were great, but God in His unfathomable Mercy chose that very time to send me a child who would become one of my greatest consolations. She and her brothers constantly bring joy and meaning to my life. Praise God that I trusted in His Ways more than my own! With the benefit of hindsight I can clearly see God's Loving Hand not only in my pregnancy but also in the timing of this child.

One day, while we still lived in the house, my grief was so great that I cried for an entire day except for the one hour I managed to stop while my children and I attended Mass. That afternoon two-year-old Alyssa had a very special message for me. Somehow that precious, tiny girl found me in our great big house, crying in the walk-in closet. She looked right into my eyes and said "Mommy, Jesus loves you!" I knew that God was loving me through her and I was greatly comforted. I love to reflect on the story of my daughter's life. God knew that despite my hopes, my marriage was ending, and He sent me a wonderful parting gift: my beloved Alyssa!

Years later I realized that I was being tempted during a time of great change to doubt God, His timing, and *the very existence of this child*. What seemed like a mistake in timing was no mistake at all. She was a case of Divine Intervention! God saw that her arrival was then or never. He knew that a time of tremendous suffering had already begun for me and returned to His servant love for love through the gift of someone very extraordinary.

FOLLOWING THE HOLY FAMILY: For the Reader

- † What are some of the joys you have in common with the Holy Family?
- † What are some of the hardships you have in common with those of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph?
- † What has God requested of you in your life thus far, and have you responded as the Holy Family did?
- † Have you asked God to help you?

Dear Lord,

Thank you for providing
wonderful examples
for us to follow
in Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.
Please guide us and strengthen us
through joys and trials
as we seek to emulate
the Holy Family
and remain faithful to Your Will.

Amen.

CHAPTER THREE

CALLED TO FAITH



Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore.

Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

—Luke 5:1-11

To allow one's self to be called to faith is to take a step toward having a personal relationship with God. Having a personal relationship with God is crucial to our discipleship. We need to know God to discern what He asks of us. We need His strength and guidance. As we continue to allow ourselves to be enticed to faith, we become even closer to Him and grow in sanctity. Let us consider a few of the many ways that we are drawn to faith each day. Have you ever found delight in the smile of a stranger or a friend? Has someone ever helped you in any way? Then you have been enticed to faith!

Have you been in contact with another human being? Or viewed your likeness in a mirror? Has someone been an inspiration to you? You have been allured to faith! Have you laughed lately? Have you spoken to a child? Were you ever concerned about someone's circumstances? Have you ever cared about anything? You were enticed to faith!

Have you ever seen the rays of the sun coming through the trees on a bright morning? Or listened to music so touching it made you cry? Have you ever looked at a beautiful picture? Or been lost in a daydream? Can you think of a time you witnessed a colorful sunset or saw a harvest moon? Have you ever marveled at the whiteness of snow, jumped in it, tasted it, shoveled it, or slid down it? You were enticed to faith!

Was there a time you were humbled by the awesome power of nature? Have the blazing colors of the trees in fall inspired you to think about their Creator? Were you ever concerned about the environment? Have you ever felt a soft

breeze? Have you ever considered the amazing diversity of flowers, animals, flavors, snowflakes, or people? Oh, how you were being enticed to faith!

Have you ever experienced joy? Did you ever say a prayer? Have you ever found holiness in a moment of silence? Have you ever passed a church and felt the desire to visit God in His house? You were being drawn to faith! Have you ever felt grateful for something? Have you ever thanked God for anything? Have you ever heard a giggle? You were being enticed to faith!

Have you ever contemplated what it is like to be loved immensely, infinitely, and unconditionally, just because you are you? Did something ever happen to you that caused you to suffer, but your suffering bore much fruit? Were others inspired by your courage? Guess what? You became closer to God when you allowed yourself to be enticed to faith. Chances are that God has even worked through you in many ways to entice others to faith!

In the Gospel of Luke we read about Simon and the other fishermen attempting to catch fish, while Jesus drew people to faith through His teaching. Imagine Simon's reaction when Jesus joined the fishermen and requested that Simon let down the nets. The fishermen had caught nothing all night! Despite making a logical and educated guess that they would still not catch any fish, Simon allowed himself to be called to faith. He did as Jesus requested.

Their subsequent catch was so great that the nets were breaking. Simon had to summon fishermen from another boat to help with the catch; they were astonished that Simon

had caught so many fish. Simon then apologized to Jesus for his unbelief. “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” Have you ever found yourself in a situation similar to Simon’s, when you were called to faith? Can you imagine yourself in the story in Simon’s place?

God works with us as He did with Simon, enticing each of us to believe and trust in Him. So many times we respond with disbelief as Simon did, and reject the notion that events could turn out any other way than what we had imagined. Simon logically said, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.” What do you think would have happened if Simon refused to be obedient to faith? What happens when we refuse to be drawn to faith?

Simon allowed himself to be enticed to faith in spite of the obvious, accepted an invitation from the Divine, “Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets,” and obeyed Jesus’ request.

Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” The apostolates of Simon and the other disciples were transformed when they chose to be followers of Christ. They were fishermen and became fishers of men. As a result of their obedience, they played prominent roles in presenting the Catholic Faith to humanity.

For allowing themselves to be enticed to faith, Simon and the apostles became cohorts in God’s plan of salvation. Our obedience is pleasing to God and crucial to our Christian life. Obedience is necessary so God can work through us. What does God have planned for you? To find out, allow yourself to be enticed to faith!

CALLED TO FAITH: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

An exercise my three children and I really enjoy is coming up with every delightful name we can think of for Jesus. Once we filled an entire piece of paper with His titles and hung the list in our kitchen. I suppose the list could go on forever, but some of our favorites are Savior, King of Kings, Son of God, Lamb of God, Son of Mary, Light of the World, Saving Bread, Sacrificial Lamb, Lord of Lords, Bread of Life, Son of Man, Saving Cup, Brother, Father, Friend, Hero...What beautiful ways to identify Jesus! They beckon us into relationship with the One who earned each title by loving us.

While in college as a young adult, I decided to stop attending Sunday Mass so I could work the weekend hours required of my job in retail. I justified my decision intellectually because it made logical and fiscal sense. My plan was to attend Mass regularly again after finishing my degree. However, every Sunday when it was time for Mass and I was not in church, I did not feel right. That “right” feeling is our God-given internal regulator that helps us discern His Will in our lives. I felt God pursuing me, and wanted to be with Him in His house and receive Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. I missed Him. I needed Him!

One weekday I returned home tired after a busy morning of classes and took a nap. Upon awaking, I heard the words, ***“I am all you need to know.”*** God was talking, and I was ready to listen. He pointed out that my priorities were out of order. Shortly thereafter, I visited the church where I made my First Eucharist as a child. Next to the altar hung a huge banner that

read, “*Come back to me.*” God was still in pursuit, speaking to me literally *and* figuratively! I knew for certain that God wanted me to return to Mass.

Our most loving God was courting me. I was being drawn to faith. God left the decision up to me. However, it was crystal clear what He wanted! Love led to the longing that God would have His proper place in my life: first place! I chose to follow God’s Will, made the changes necessary to attend Mass again regularly, and never regretted my decision.

Little did I know then that God’s pursuit of me would continue, and that one day I would not only be attending daily Mass, but would also receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation regularly. God does not want our relationship with Him to be superficial. The blessings that have resulted from my choices have been abundant. I delight in reflecting on how God continued to patiently pursue me because of His great love for me. Most compassionate, loving God, I love you back!

CALLED TO FAITH: For the Reader

- † What are your favorite titles for Jesus?
- † Are you willing to be allured to faith, sometimes despite the obvious?
- † In what ways have you been called to faith?
- † What were your responses?
- † How is God calling you to greater intimacy, and what steps are you taking to give Him the proper place in your life?

Dear Lord,

Please help us
recognize
the many ways
You attract us to faith,
for the first step
in having
a relationship with You
is recognizing Your Presence.

Amen.

CHAPTER FOUR

ACCEPTING GOD'S LOVE



One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"
But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."
He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."
—Luke 23:39-43

Think of just one mutually rewarding relationship you have had during your life and the positive impact that relationship has had on you. Now go a step farther, and imagine for a moment the impact an intimate relationship with God can have on you! If we aspire to have close relationships with people, it makes sense to aspire to a close relationship with the God who created us, loves us, and awaits our love in return. Have you ever heard the expression “To have a friend one must be a friend”? This expression begs the question, do we welcome God’s presence and His goodness in our lives, or do we reject Him?

Do we even recognize God’s presence? If so, how often do we acknowledge Him? Only when times are good? Only when times are bad? Monthly? Just on Sundays, Christmas, and/or Easter? Daily? Hourly? Moment to moment? How many times we say to ourselves, “Not now, later, because...” How often we create and nurture relationships on our terms, not giving any consideration to what others want or need. How often we treat God the same way!

The first step to beginning any relationship requires making the decision to have a relationship. To have a relationship with God, we must respond to our longing by deciding that we want to have a relationship with Him. Just like relationships with people require effort, so too does our relationship with God. Decision first, effort second! Healthy relationships require love, respect, effort, nurturing, time, good communication, patience, trust, understanding, forgiveness, and sacrifice from both parties.

God is our ultimate relationship role model. In His relationship with us, God always gives us love, respect, attention, nurturing, and time. He communicates openly with us and is patient as we learn, make mistakes along the way, and make progress. We can always trust Him, and He is always very respectful. God never forces us to do anything, and allows us to make decisions for ourselves.

In His relationship with us, God is infinitely and unconditionally loving and understanding. He is not distant but is always close. He is forgiving, having died for us sinners. God is also sacrificial, having dwelt among us as Jesus our Brother, and secured our redemption when He took on our sins and paid the debt we owed through His passion and death. *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends"* (John 15:12-13).

Evaluating the time and effort we put into relationships yields very useful information about ourselves and about the quality of our relationships. Such self examination can stimulate personal growth, improve our relationships, and most certainly can be put to good use as we carry out our life's work. Relationships suffer when they are neglected. Regardless of the current quality of our relationship with God, He always loves us, always pursues us, always welcomes us, and is always willing to take up where we left off. No matter what effort we put forth, God always does His share. Let us eagerly meet our most loving God halfway.

Think of how many times you have been rebuked, blamed, rejected, neglected, or condemned by another person for

something that you have or have not said or done. Think of how many times you acted this way toward others. How many relationships end because of a lack of forgiveness. What pain we feel when we are rebuked, blamed, rejected, neglected, condemned, or not forgiven. Imagine how God feels when we rebuke, blame, reject, neglect, condemn, or hold a grudge towards Him. How many times we unjustly reject God! Yet He eagerly awaits our return and always welcomes us back.

The Gospel of Luke shows Jesus continually exercising His ministry of pardon.⁵ In Luke 23:39-43, we read that the Good Thief crucified on the cross next to Jesus recognized and acknowledged that his own punishment was just. In his deplorable condition, the guilty man accepted responsibility for his actions. At a time that could have been one of utmost despair, he allowed himself to be enticed to faith, asked for forgiveness, and accepted salvation.

Why would the actions of a condemned criminal merit mention in the Bible, and secure a place for the Good Thief in history? The Good Thief voiced compassion for the battered and dying Jesus. At the moment Jesus redeemed the entire human race, one whom Jesus came to save recognized his Savior. He acknowledged Jesus as severely and unjustly punished, offering no resistance while forgiving and redeeming the guilty. Imagine the joy the Good Thief's decision must have given our suffering Lord! May we also give Jesus the joy of accepting all He offers us.

In his conversation with the other thief, we realize the Good Thief acknowledged his Savior *and* was remorseful

⁵ *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p. 161

for his sins. "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." The story of the Good Thief is significant because he acknowledged Jesus' personal ministry of sacrificial love and forgiveness, and accepted Jesus' entire offer, all in one sentence. "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

Jesus' final words spoken to anyone on earth were directed to the Good Thief, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." For his trust, the Good Thief gained redemption and was rewarded with the privilege of being among the first of men to enter into heaven, right on the heels of his Savior! May we respond to the lesson taught to us through the personal apostolate of the Good Thief, by accepting the redemption offered to us by our Savior, by accounting for our actions, and by treating everyone with the mercy shown to us by Jesus.

Each of us has the opportunity to have a relationship with someone who knows us better than anyone. God knows us even better than we know ourselves. Imagine having a relationship with someone who is always available to us, is always patient, kind, and merciful. God never rejects us, always hears us, and is always willing to reconcile with us. Envision having a close relationship with the One who loves you so immensely that He gave His life so that you could spend an eternity filled with joy in His most loving Presence.

Once we choose to begin a relationship with God or improve the relationship we have with Him, and truly work at

it, the quality of our relationships with other people also improve. Peace and joy abound. We are better able to carry out our apostolate and are more fulfilled in them. Let us model all our relationships on God's relationship with us. We can begin like the Good Thief did, by welcoming Him into our lives and accepting His love, for He comes where He is welcomed.

ACCEPTING GOD'S LOVE: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

A few years ago on a hot summer day I was curling my hair for a special occasion with a combination curling iron and hair dryer. Roughly halfway through the process I rolled an uncurled section of hair to the crown of my head. My tresses were coiled in the bristled curling iron right to my scalp. Much to my surprise and frustration, the curling iron became stuck right there on top of my head. Naturally, I resisted the inconvenience and began struggling to free my hair.

No matter what I tried, the curling iron would not loosen its grip. I became very frustrated and overheated during what became a bitter struggle to free my hair. In time my arm pained with fatigue from holding the enmeshed curling iron over my head. All efforts to free my hair were futile. Finally, at a loss for what to do next, I balanced the curling iron on the crown of my head, put my arm down for a rest, stopped doing anything, and waited.

After I resigned the struggle, something happened. God provided me with the answer to freeing my hair. He told me to ask for His help, *whenever* it was needed. No problem is too small or too impossible for God! How often we make things complicated, when with God things are so simple! How often we struggle alone, instead of asking for and accepting His help. God is always available and willing to assist.

I immediately followed through and asked God to help me. On my very next attempt, the curling iron that was stuck at the top of my head slipped free. I learned a very important lesson about God's desire to help us and the power of asking for His assistance. This very effective life strategy has helped me many times since. God is such a great teacher!

ACCEPTING GOD'S LOVE: FOR THE READER

- † How much effort do you put into the relationships that matter to you?
- † What is the quality of those relationships?
- † How much effort are you putting into your relationship with God?
- † What is the quality of your relationship with Him?
- † What have you done to welcome His presence in your life and meet Him halfway?
- † How has your relationship with God affected your discipleship?

Dear Lord,

Help us to recognize
Your many invitations
to have a closer relationship
with You.

Grant us the grace
to meet you halfway,
and accept
Your loving offer of
salvation and sanctification.

Amen.

CHAPTER FIVE

LOVING GOD BACK



So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink" (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food). The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans). Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

—John 4:5-15

The topics discussed in the first four chapters of this book have provided us with important considerations as we seek to fulfill our Christian discipleship. We acknowledged the fact that God loves us always. We studied events from the lives of the Holy Family to guide us as we carry out our life's work. We contemplated some of the many ways we are called to faith each day and saw ourselves as instruments of God enticing others to faith. We discussed how accepting God's love leads us into closer relationship with Him and with others.

This chapter takes us another step closer to God as we consider returning to God the unconditional love that He gives to us. By responding to the challenging questions posed to you at the end of the first four chapters, you have already grown closer to the Love of your life. Already your efforts have led toward accepting God's love as you allow yourself to be attracted to faith. Now we move on to our responsibility to love God back, for "...love is repaid by love alone..."⁶ Before we can love in return, we must first be willing to accept love, so let us dedicate a moment to examine our individual responses to being loved.

Consider the following questions. How do you respond to love in general? Are you comfortable with being loved and with loving in return? Do you feel worthy of being loved? How many reasons we come up with for not being worthy of love! Many times we reject love and are not even aware that we are doing it. An awareness of how we respond when we are loved and the reasons behind those responses are crucial. In order to be loved, our permission is essential. There is

⁶ St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, p. 195

no doubt God wants us to accept His love in its many diverse expressions. Let us delve inwardly a bit further.

When someone pays you a compliment, do you fully accept the compliment with humble gratitude, do you hesitate to accept the gesture, or do you reject the compliment outright? How do you respond when someone offers to help you? Do you accept a helping hand, recognizing the love of God in the offer? Do you accept help only if you are in dire need? Or, do you reject assistance, perhaps not wanting to inconvenience others?

So often we get into the habit of rejecting subtle and not so subtle acts of love in our lives. We may do this with the best of intentions. However, we reject God's love when we act this way. Rejecting the love of God through the actions of other people stifles God's working through them. Recognizing whether we accept or reject love and being aware of when and why we reject love helps us to see our responses to love in a different light. God never rejects our love, so let us fully accept the love that God sends to us, directly and indirectly. Let us joyfully return this love to God, directly and by sharing it with other people. *"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me"* (Matthew 25:40).

Consider the story of the Samaritan woman at the well presented at the start of this chapter. A travel weary Jesus approached the well and asked the woman for a drink. In her autobiography *Story of a Soul*, St. Thérèse offered this striking commentary on the conversation between Jesus and the woman. "See, then, all that Jesus lays claim to from us; He

has no need of our works but only of our love, for the same God who declares He has no need to tell us when He is hungry did not fear to beg for a little water from the Samaritan woman. He was thirsty. But when He said: 'Give me to drink,' it was the love of His poor creature the Creator of the universe was seeking. He was thirsty for love.⁷

Let us accept God's love in its many delightful manifestations and love God in return. We can accomplish this directly and through the work we do in our imitation of Christ. During the final moments of His mortal life Jesus stated from the cross, "*I am thirsty*" (John 19:28). God thirsts for our love! "If Jesus Christ thirsted for souls, must not a Christian also thirst? Has He not called us to be His Apostles and His Ambassadors, in order that His Incarnation might be prolonged through the continued dispensation of the divine through the human?"⁸ We can quench God's great thirst by loving Him back.

⁷ St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, p. 189

⁸ Fulton J. Sheen, *The Rainbow of Sorrow*, p. 62-63

LOVING GOD BACK: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

I tell you with a grateful smile on my face that God has had to work very hard with me. Thankfully He has persevered patiently, gently, and lovingly. God has been a constant presence through the joys and sorrows of my life. At times I have clearly perceived that He was close, while other times His Presence was not obvious. Nevertheless, He was always there.

Perhaps God was closest to me during times when He seemed absent. Most certainly He was there, teaching and guiding me. God was without a doubt very close to me during my greatest trial, the seven years before, during, and after the end of my marriage. During the first years of that trial, God summoned me to greater intimacy with Him by gently and lovingly inviting me to attend daily Mass. Certainly He knew that it was during that time of great suffering, personal loss, and dramatic change that I would be most ready and willing to accept such an attractive invitation!

God's timing is always perfect. He knows what He is doing. A life saving ring is not remarkable when hanging unneeded by a pool, but becomes the most important object in the universe while in trouble in the water. I was most willing to accept God's invitation into greater relationship when I was in most need of a Savior. Thus my trials were of tremendous value. In addition, suffering helped me to discern what is of true worth.

My intentions have always been to be a devoted Catholic and faithful servant of God. However, there was a time when my plans were not leading to a closer relationship with God like I had hoped, and I did not know what to do differently. As it

happened, the tremendous spiritual growth that I had yearned for took place during my trials. God repeatedly encouraged me to patiently accept His Divine Will in all circumstances.

One day before picking my children up from school, I entered the daily Mass chapel and began to pray. Then, something very significant and very extraordinary happened. While kneeling before the beautiful life-sized sculpture of Jesus hanging on the cross, I handed my life over to God *with no restrictions*. I was ready to venture beyond having acknowledged and accepted Him by giving myself back to Him completely. Once I completely surrendered my life, God could work in me and through me on His most perfect terms.

How often we talk about accepting Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior, but we must take care not to stop there! Acknowledging Jesus as our Lord and God is vital, but we remain in control until we give ourselves back to Him and place ourselves at His service unconditionally. Only then is He able to carry on as He sees fit. Handing one's life over to God completely is not always easy or comfortable. In fact, it can be downright frightening. However, it is crucial to our relationship with Him, to our sanctification, and to our life's work.

I remember thinking that it took a whole lot of suffering to get me to the point of allowing God to be in charge. Our most loving God persevered and continued working with me. What great love! I was precisely where God wanted me, and happily, I was right where I wanted me. My suffering had become a tremendous ally in my quest for greater Divine Intimacy. I continue to visit the chapel and from time to time renew my promise. The day God received back from me that which He had given first was a very, very beautiful day.

LOVING GOD BACK: FOR THE READER

- † How do you respond when love is shown to you by others?
- † Is it easier for you to accept love from people when realizing that all love comes from God?
- † Do you see yourself as worthy of God's love?
- † When you recognize yourself as worthy of love and understand that God wants to love you, is it easier to accept the many ways God loves you each day?
- † Is it easier then to love God, yourself, and others in return?

Dear Lord,

You love us
so gently and persistently
through all the moments
of our lives.

May we make
our relationship
with You complete
by choosing
to love You back.

Amen.

CHAPTER SIX

SHARING JESUS' PASSION



Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

—Matthew 27: 27-31

At various times in life we suffer physical, emotional, and spiritual pain. Suffering is part of the human condition, and is commonly viewed as unpleasant and to be avoided. However, suffering plays a crucial part in our formation. Suffering is of immeasurable value to our Christian walk. That is because suffering plays an integral part in loving!

While the experience of love can be very pleasurable, love can also cause us great pain. For example, when someone we cherish dies, we experience profound sorrow. When we acknowledge the suffering of another person, empathize with them, and serve them, we share their pain. When we decide to have relationships, we put ourselves at risk of experiencing pain in many different ways. Love can cost us much. His love for us cost Jesus everything.

Examining how we view and respond to suffering provides us the opportunity to evaluate and redefine our approach to suffering. Consider your responses to the following questions.

Do you regard suffering as worthless, or as a reality of life that can result in great good?

Do you reject suffering or embrace difficulties patiently, relying on God's strength to get you through trials?

Under what circumstances are you most willing to remain faithful to God's Will?

Certainly those caring for the sick, the young, the frail, the lonely, the abandoned, and those in need exemplify the sacrificial love Christ extended to each of us. Conversely, when we

allow ourselves to be the ones ministered to, we cooperate with the Christ-like service of other people. Let us take care not to block the actions of God working through others!

Experiencing physical, emotional, or spiritual pain may cause us to withdraw ourselves from the source or perceived source of the pain. When we suffer, we may also withdraw ourselves from God. However, suffering has tremendous personal and social benefit. Just as a sculptor carves his masterpiece to perfection over time and with much effort and attention, so too are we sculpted and refined as people through joyful and painful experiences. *"My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing"* (James 1:2-4).

By examining our responses to frustration, disappointment, delays, detours, losses, or pain, we gather important insight about how we view suffering. Do we lament when events jolt us out of our comfort zone or when we experience discomfort? Do we ask God that we and others obtain exactly what we want? Or, do we pray for the strength to persevere and remain faithful to God and His Plans? Do we see our plans as being better than God's plans?

Some of the obstacles we may face include illness, loss of income or security, separation, death, divorce, disillusionment, accidents, relocation, job loss, career change, despair, abuse, neglect, and lack of cooperation from ourselves or others.

Sometimes our circumstances may be dire and catastrophic. The goal is to trust God in good times as well as during trials and to look to Him for guidance and direction when we are suffering physically, emotionally, or spiritually. May we see all circumstances as opportunities to bring us closer to God and to each other.

If we are unwilling to embrace the discomfort and pain of trials, neither we nor our Christian discipleship can ever mature to become extraordinary. We increase our sanctity when we patiently cooperate with God through all circumstances. How often we have the misconception that God is very close during prosperity and is very distant during trials! Actually, God is never so close to us as when we accept difficulties with great love. Why? When we bear our trials patiently and lovingly, we resemble Jesus. Great things are accomplished when we persevere through trials and allow God to work in us and through us.

Just as Jesus' Crucifixion led to our redemption and was followed by His glorious Resurrection, so too can our suffering be followed by our own resurrection of sorts: intimacy with God, personal growth, increased sanctity, greater faith, and an increased capacity to serve others. The outcome is love! Something very critical happens during times of difficulty: we find ourselves more willing to turn to God. Certainly it is during trials that God gets my best attention! Whenever we suffer, we should ask God "What are You trying to tell/show/teach me?"

Moreover, we must be willing to accept His response! Suffering provides us the opportunity to reevaluate, learn,

and grow in virtue and love. Suffering is essential to our life's work. Many times we are able to serve others better and become more compassionate as a result of our trials. How important it is to be open to God's plan during such pivotal times, and maintain our trust in Him.

Certainly the suffering Jesus endured throughout His lifetime and at the time of His death had great purpose. As discussed in Chapter 2, Jesus suffered a great deal during His mortal life. He embraced a life of poverty and service, living and dying for our sake. God chose to do this because of His great love for us. What would have happened if Jesus decided not to suffer for us, His creatures? What happens when we resist during times of trial instead of being open to God's plans?

Jesus' personal ministry was one of sacrificial love. *"Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end"* (John 13:1). Let us boldly define trials as events having tremendous value, resonating beyond ourselves to benefit countless others. Let us examine the essential role of suffering in our personal apostolate by looking to Jesus as our model to imitate. *"Every pain patiently borne, every blow to self, shapes the real eternal self. It was the Crucifixion of Our Lord that prepared the way for His Resurrection and Glory."*⁹

In previous chapters we discussed acknowledging God's presence in our lives, accepting His love, loving Him in return, and allowing Him to use us as instruments of His love. This process can be refined and can come to fruition through

⁹ Fulton J. Sheen, *Our Grounds For Hope*, p. 36

suffering. Consider this beautiful description by Fulton J. Sheen, “Every tear, disappointment and grieved heart is a blank check. If we write our name on it, it is worthless. If we sign it with Christ’s Name, it is infinite in its value. In prosperity, Christ gives you His gifts; in suffering with faith, He gives you Himself.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Fulton J. Sheen, *Our Grounds For Hope*, p. 14

SHARING JESUS' PASSION: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

Several years ago, my family and I visited the tomb of Venerable Fr. Solanus Casey at St. Bonaventure in Detroit. During our initial visit there, my sister suggested that we touch our scapulars to Fr. Solanus' tomb, and so we did. We returned two weeks later, and while in the gift shop, I suddenly felt instructed to purchase a "woman's" scapular. While continuing to browse, I was unable to think of anyone I knew who needed one, so I did not purchase the scapular. Once again, I looked to my own limited knowledge instead of trusting in God, who knows everything!

A few weeks later on my way home after Mass, I was at the scene of a terrible accident. A young man on a motorcycle was struck by a sport utility vehicle on a five-lane, fifty-mile-per-hour stretch of well traveled road. The force of the impact hurled the man horizontally across four lanes of the road and he landed in front of the car ahead of me. Traffic stopped abruptly. The fact that the man was not hit again by another vehicle was in itself a miracle. I was very afraid to see the condition of the man who was most certainly injured, so I decided to remain in my van. Competing with that decision was a strong prompting to leave my vehicle and go to him.

I resisted, certain that there was nothing I could do to help. I remained in my van, again relying on my own knowledge instead of trusting in God. However, God had something very important for me to give him. Once again, I felt strongly compelled

to get out of my van and go to him. God's Will was very clear and He provided me with the courage I needed to leave my vehicle and approach the man.

The scene was as horrifying as I had feared. The man's injuries were severe and his broken body convulsed violently on the road. Crowds of people stood back on the sides of the road, weeping. As I wept, I had an understanding of this man as a brother to us all. While approaching the man, *I understood that I was to remove my scapular and place it on him!* In that instant I knew that the woman's scapular I was instructed to buy at St. Bonaventure was meant for me, to replace the one I was wearing.

Weeks before the accident, God had already planned that my scapular, touched to the tomb of Fr. Solanus, would be given to the injured man as his life hung in the balance. A firefighter on the scene placed the scapular on the man for me. I was filled with an overwhelming desire to pray to The Virgin Mary and knew that she was there interceding for him, as a most loving mother would. I was astounded to witness how the young man was given this pivotal intervention by God, along with Our Lady and Father Solanus. What love, what mercy!

I remained at the scene until the paramedics arrived. They were instructed that the scapular was to remain with the injured man. Once that was accomplished, I felt Divine permission to leave. At that very moment a police officer approached me and showed me a way to depart the area. On the way home, I knew that God's Most Perfect Will had been accomplished in all that had just taken place.

A feeling of total consolation superseded any worry for the man despite his horrific condition. I experienced incredible

peace and understood that we should trust in God always. The profound peace, consolation, and joy I felt remained with me for two months. The remarkable events of that day left me with absolutely no doubt that we must unite ourselves to God's Divine Will and trust Him, no matter how tragic events appear to our human perception.

SHARING JESUS' PASSION: FOR THE READER

- † In what ways have your trials helped you to grow closer to God and to others?
- † Have you asked for God's guidance and for patience during suffering?
- † Do you ask for the grace to see events from His Perspective?
- † Do you feel greater love for God knowing He chose to suffer for your sake?
- † How has suffering helped develop and refine your personal apostolate?

Dear Lord,

Please grant us the grace
to trust in You always,
and to view trials as opportunities
to grow closer to You and to others.

Guide us
as we open our hearts
and allow ourselves
to develop
and be transformed
into the likeness
of Your Son Jesus.

Amen.

CHAPTER SEVEN

HIS RESURRECTION

AND OUR JOURNEY



While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence. Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”

—Luke 24:36-47

Imagine what life was like for Mary, the Apostles, and the followers of Jesus immediately after the brutal torture and death of the most loving of men. They must have experienced terrible shock and profound grief. Perhaps they also felt confusion and uncertainty as they did in Jesus' final days: *"They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him"* (Mark 9:30-32).

All was not said and done with the Death of Jesus, for on the third day He Resurrected as foretold in the Old Testament. Imagine the joy His beloved Mother, Apostles, and followers experienced when Jesus appeared to them! *"Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age'"* (Matthew 28:16-20).

Jesus' Mother and His Apostles and followers experienced dramatic changes to their apostolic life after His Death and Resurrection. They accepted God's Will and the Catholic Church spread throughout the world. In the previous chapter, we discussed the role suffering plays in our relationship

with God and in our service to one another. We also considered how suffering can transform us as followers of Christ. Trials can stimulate us to consider taking a path that perhaps we never even considered, one that is more in conformity with God's Will.

Imagine if God bluntly said to several of the Apostles, "In three years I want you to stop fishing. The work you have done your entire adult life is about to change. After Jesus' Crucifixion I will institute a new religion called Catholicism and you are going to travel extensively to bring it to people all over the world." Visualize what their reaction would have been! Instead, Jesus prepared His followers for their career changes over the course of His public ministry and also after His death. The Holy Spirit enlightened them during Pentecost, and God continued to guide them through the Holy Spirit and Mary, for the rest of their lives. Similarly, God prepares and guides each of us with His loving "Triune approach," through Mary, His Mother.

Trials may lead us to look outside our limited view so we can consider God's plan for our lives. However, difficulties can throw our lives out of balance. Unresolved fear and trauma can limit what God can do through us. In the Bible passage quoted at the start of this chapter, Jesus acknowledged the feelings of His Mother and the Apostles when He appeared to them after His Resurrection. He stated "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" Jesus reassured and instructed them, stating that as it was foretold, He would suffer and rise again on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached to all nations in His name.

Great good came out of Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf, and His presence after the Resurrection must have brought His beloved great comfort. Jesus did not instruct those present to get even, to hold a grudge, or to remain in despair. God had work for them to accomplish! He wants us to ask for healing and also embrace repentance and forgiveness so we can share in His great ministry of love. God is always ready and available to heal us, so ask God to mend the wounds you have acquired during your life.

In previous chapters we determined that once we have made the decision to have a relationship, that relationship requires maintenance. Just like our relationships with people have their ups and downs, so too can our relationship with God. We are especially tempted to doubt during trials. At times after we have pursued a relationship with God, we choose to still believe in Him but hold back from greater faith, intimacy, and trust. This can happen when we are disappointed or wounded. Perhaps we have been hurt by our own choices, or we have been hurt by people and events in our lives. Unresolved anger, grief, and trauma can cause us to resist when things do not work out the way we had hoped or planned.

Throughout life we need to ask God to help us recognize what our hurts are. The God who created us understands exactly how we feel and why we feel the way we do. He patiently waits for us to accept His personal invitation to greater intimacy. Each person has been given a unique mission in conjunction with God's Divine plan. Each person has their own unique talents and is always in formation. Even if our

gifts are not readily apparent, they most certainly exist! Plain and simple, the world benefits from the contribution of every person's Christian service.

"The reason moments of catastrophe may be the eves of spiritual victory is because it is in those moments of defeat that man's pride is most humbled and his soul thus prepared for the help of God...It is only when Peter had labored all the night and taken nothing that he was given the miraculous draught of fishes."¹¹ Trials prepare us for growth and change. Ask God to reveal to you how He now wants you to serve Him through your personal apostolate.

When we ask God to guide us in our efforts, He will! Do not doubt, for the God who can make something out of absolutely nothing can provide for our needs. He longs to bring us peace, healing, and inspiration when we are ready. The first step is to make the decision to acknowledge God and accept Him into our lives. Then we must put forth the effort to have our relationship with Him grow. Like the Good Thief, our reward will be great.

¹¹ Fulton J. Sheen, *Our Grounds For Hope*, p. 31-32

HIS RESURRECTION AND OUR JOURNEY: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

Seven years ago, my little daughter and I happened to be in the narthex of the chapel at our church after dropping my boys off at the school on church grounds. Daily Mass was beginning and the congregation was singing the opening hymn “Crown Him with Many Crowns.” As I listened to the song and saw the faithful gathered for Mass, I felt God gently and lovingly invite me to attend. He knew that after so many years of hardship, I really needed His strength and healing. Even though I was right by the church every morning, I had never even considered attending daily Mass.

Soon I succumbed to God’s loving advances and accepted His invitation. Some of those who attend regularly fondly refer to daily Mass as “Breakfast with the King.” What a way to start the day, in the presence of Jesus! Daily reception of Jesus in the Eucharist provided me the strength I needed to persevere. My children joined me for daily Mass in the summer and on school breaks. Their presence at those Masses was the perfect balm for the sorrow we felt at their not attending Mass every other weekend when they were not with me. Frequent reception of the Eucharist provided us the love, strength, and healing we all desperately needed.

As Pope Benedict XVI stated in his first encyclical *God is Love*, to become a source of love, “one must constantly drink anew from the original source, which is Jesus Christ, from whose pierced heart flows the love of God” (John 19:34).¹² Soon I began spending time in God’s Presence by visiting with Jesus in the Tabernacle just before picking my children up from school.

¹² Pope Benedict XVI, *God is Love*, #7

God shared His peace and joy with me during many years of persecution. I learned of the immense value of the Eucharist, Eucharistic Exposition and Adoration, Reconciliation, Holy Hour, praying the Rosary and the Divine Mercy Chaplet, and prayer.

So many times while in great pain I affirmed my confidence in God to look after us, and He clearly demonstrated that He was. However, trauma can limit us. At times it can be very difficult to see beyond spiritual, emotional, or physical pain. For a while I chose to maintain an intimate “status quo” with God and not venture any closer to Him. Certainly part of this moratorium was due to the fact that all my energy was being used to get through each difficult day. God waited patiently for me to be ready to venture closer. He loved me all the while, never lost patience with me, and never forced me before I was ready. He understood my sorrow, my pain, and my burdens because Jesus had experienced them too, and in much greater measure.

Despite the wonders happening in my life and the gift of a solid faith, sometimes I was tempted to frustration and impatience as I looked for events to occur according to my expectations. God encouraged me to be patient in my trials. Like Jesus’ Apostles, I was being guided along a new path. Our journey through life is a learning process, and we must allow ourselves to be educated! Who better to help us than the God who made us and knows us better than we know ourselves. We must listen for God’s promptings to guide us as we make our choices, knowing that He is always there to pick up the pieces when we or others in our lives fail.

In time I began to heal and eventually was ready to approach the reason why I resisted deepening my relationship with God.

My reason is a common one: God did not fix what was broken. Even though I trusted in God and loved Him, I was disheartened that my marriage ended. Certainly I understood that God does not interfere with anyone's free will, but at the time I was disappointed that God, who can do anything, did not save my marriage. Later I came to understand that I had found God guilty of a crime He had not even committed.

Once I was far enough along in the grieving process, I was able to move beyond the trauma of my own "passion" into a personal "resurrection" and embrace my evolving apostolate. With God's love and guidance, I made progress and experienced personal and spiritual growth in ways that I could never have imagined. God never rushed me and His promptings were always patient, gentle, and loving. May we seek to emulate His considerate ways in our interactions with one another.

**HIS RESURRECTION AND OUR JOURNEY:
FOR THE READER**

- † Have difficult circumstances ever led you to remain distant from God?
- † How long did God patiently wait for you?
- † What helped you to embrace your changing path in life?
- † Do you view times of transition during and after trials as a chance to deepen your relationship to God and as an opportunity to grow spiritually and personally?
- † How has your personal apostolate evolved over time?

Dear Lord,

May we find
personal strength and healing
in the example of
Your glorious Resurrection.
Help us to persevere beyond trials
to recapture joy and purpose
as we serve You
through our dynamic and evolving
personal apostolate.

Amen.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF SANCTITY



Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples – for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

—Mark 2:13-17

Jesus' decision to eat with tax collectors and sinners was scandalous behavior in those times. Back then Jesus sought out sinners throughout His public ministry and incurred the wrath of the Pharisees, who were enraged that He would dwell with, teach, and reach out to the sinful. Jesus continues this "scandalous" behavior to this day, by reaching out to His creation. Loving us is never scandalous behavior to God, and yet He incurs our wrath in modern times by challenging us to be sanctified. He loves us all and encourages us to embrace holiness as we reconcile with Him, with ourselves, and with each other.

This chapter discusses the importance of deciding in favor of holiness day by day, moment by moment as we seek to emulate Christ. Historically, the original sin committed by Adam and Eve altered God's original plan for humanity and resulted in a division between man and God. Our Merciful God promised a Savior to conquer sin and restore the human race. At the appointed time, Jesus became man and took our sins upon Himself to satisfy Divine Justice. The fulfillment of God's plan came about through the sacrificial love and obedience of Jesus.

Jesus' Passion and Death on the Cross made passage into heaven possible for all people. However, to make God's plan of restoration and Jesus' sacrifice come to fruition, each of us must cooperate in our own redemption. Even though Jesus died to save us, sin continues to distance each one of us from God, and a soul can still perish of its own free will by deciding not to cooperate with God. "God wants us 'all to be saved'; for this reason He gave us His Son, and with Him and through

Him, all the means necessary for our salvation. Therefore, if a soul is not saved, it alone will be responsible.”¹³

Sanctity is “...the perfection of the Christian life...As grace grows and flourishes in our soul, its influence becomes deeper and wider; and when this influence extends effectively to all our actions, directing them solely to God’s glory and uniting us wholly to Him by means of charity, then we have reached the fullness of Christian life, sanctity.”¹⁴ *“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful”* (Colossians 3:12-15).

Our salvation depends on our efforts to live holy lives. *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”* (Matthew 5:48). Beyond the Cross, it is our duty to merit our salvation through the choices we make and by the love that we share. Our behavior leads to very real outcomes for ourselves and for other people. Thus, sanctity becomes vital to discipleship, as we strive to live holy lives and encourage holiness in others. To live in uniformity with God’s Will, we must incorporate sanctity into our everyday existence. *“If you love me, you will keep my commandments”* (John 14:15).

When does sanctity begin within us? “Baptism has deposited within us this seed of sanctity, which is grace, a seed

¹³ Father Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, O.C.D., *Divine Intimacy* p. 6

¹⁴ Father Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, O.C.D., *Divine Intimacy* p. 9

capable of blossoming into precious fruits of supernatural and eternal life for the soul that zealously cultivates it. By elevating us to the supernatural state, grace makes us capable of entering into relations with the Blessed Trinity, that is, capable of knowing and loving God as He is in Himself, as He knows and loves Himself.”¹⁵

To grow in sanctity, we must seek to become closer to God by following His commandments. We become sanctified when we honor His Sacraments, attend Mass, make frequent use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and do penance for our sins. We become like Jesus when we receive Him in the Eucharist. We become more Christ-like when we converse with God through prayer, read His Living Word in the Bible, and properly educate ourselves in the Catholic Faith. We become holy when we are obedient to His Will. “...Our following of Christ, who is God made man, is the infallible road to sanctity. This same incarnate God is the source of all the graces we need to become holy. As He told us, ‘Without me you can do nothing.’ Without His grace, our minds are blind. Without His grace, our wills are helpless to do what He wants of us to reach that blessed destiny for which we were made.”¹⁶

Crucial to our sanctity is our efforts to become Christ-like by sharing His love however and whenever we can with other people. “It has been said it makes no difference what you believe; it all depends on how you act. This is psychological nonsense, for a man acts out of his beliefs. Our Lord placed truth or belief in Him first; then came sanctification and good deeds. But here truth was not a vague ideal, but a Person. Truth was now lovable, because only a Person is

¹⁵ Father Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, O.C.D., *Divine Intimacy*, p. 9.

¹⁶ Father John A. Hardon, S.J. Archives, *Christology*

lovable. Sanctity becomes the response the heart makes to Divine truth and its unlimited mercy to humanity.”¹⁷

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:7-12).

Sanctity is crucial to loving God, ourselves, and each other! Thus sanctity is essential to our apostolate. Each of us is called to live a life of sanctity. We become sanctified through the effort we put into our relationship with God, and our sanctity bears much fruit through the work we do in our personal apostolate. May we look to God to strengthen and guide us as we grow in holiness, each and every day.

¹⁷ Fulton J. Sheen, *Life of Christ*, p. 313

THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF SANCTITY: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

Several years ago my mother wisely suggested that I have a physical examination to ensure good health through my trials. The doctor found that I had an hyperactive thyroid. The specialist confirmed the diagnosis and also found a second problem: a nodule on the back of my thyroid. He suggested the nodule be biopsied to rule out cancer. While lying on the biopsy gurney in the hospital, five needles were inserted in my neck. I remember thinking that it was hard to imagine things getting any worse. There I was, a single parent in the middle of a very difficult divorce, three small children, constant persecution, house for sale, security gone, future very uncertain, and two new health concerns, one possibly cancer.

Perhaps this story could have been a personal reflection for Chapter 6, Sharing Jesus' Passion. Certainly I felt like there were many parallels with my situation and the Passion of Jesus. Persecuted, lied about, scorned, and hated. Betrayed by one I had trusted. Mocked and forced to go to court. Mistreated further by the justice system. As the judge publicly declared the death of my marriage, I imagined Jesus publicly condemned to death. Possessions taken. The moment the sale sign was driven into the front lawn of our yard, I thought of the blows of the hammer as Jesus was nailed to the cross. Mystical suffering in union with Jesus.

An event stands out during this time of tremendous suffering that fits right into this chapter on the crucial role of sanctity. My children and I were still living in the house we had built,

awaiting a sale so we could move somewhere else. The responsibilities of caring for the house and raising three small children while being persecuted inside and outside of court was crushing. Fortunately, God sent my mother and sister to help us, and they were very loving collaborators. We lived in a rural area and were rather isolated. I remember thinking once that if I died, hardly anyone would ever remember me. I was tempted during my trials to think that my life did not matter. The truth is that my life, and everyone else's life, matters. Our lives matter a great deal!

Maintaining the large house was my responsibility. Unfortunately things often broke, very unusual because the house and almost everything in it was new. One day I was going downstairs to address the broken water filter in the basement. I remember feeling overwhelmed by everything and not having the faintest idea what to do with the broken water filtration system. Suddenly right there on the stairs I received a very hostile interior locution, "You are nothing but a stupid housewife!"

The hateful nature of the message was shocking. I thought for a moment, and then replied out loud, "I am NOT!" Good for me! Later, I contemplated why a rather unknown and isolated young mother who was being relentlessly persecuted by someone she had loved and trusted, not working for money and recently denied a worldly title, would be the target of such loathing and hatred. I was a target because my life has great purpose. By loving my children, seeking to be holy in the everyday and ordinary, and striving to become closer to God, I was a huge threat to the enemies of good. Thus, evil lashed out at me with its fury.

In retrospect, I can see the attack on my personhood as an "housewife" during a time of great trial was significant for two

reasons. It proves that suffering has great value, as does the ethical work we accomplish each and every day. Ordinary work is made extraordinary with the power of God's love. My suffering has produced many precious fruit, and among them is one I find particularly sweet: this book on your apostolate of love.

**THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF SANCTITY:
For the Reader**

- † In what ways are you taking responsibility for your salvation by living a holy life?
- † What are some other ways you can increase your sanctity?
- † Do you see your life as having great purpose?
- † Are you embracing that purpose fully?
- † Have you asked God to help you?

Dear Lord,

Please help us to embrace
Your magnificent offer
of redemption and sanctification,
made possible and obtainable by
the power of
Your great love for each of us.
May we strive to aid others
in this quest we all share
through the loving service
of our apostolate.

Amen.

CHAPTER NINE

THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT



Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end...And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."

—John 13:2-8

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”
—John 13:12-15

Imagine in your mind what the scene was like as Jesus, a member of the Blessed Trinity, laid aside His garments, girded Himself with a towel, and washed the feet of His Apostles. The Master became the servant when He lovingly placed Himself at the service of His creation. Once again, Jesus’ action was very contrary to the customs of that time. This was not lost on Peter, who stated “Lord, are you going to wash my feet? You will never wash my feet.”

Jesus would have it otherwise, and very clearly instructed everyone through all time with His words, “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” Jesus consistently served others throughout His life. He came to redeem and sanctify, and role modeled the proper etiquette God desires of all people, regardless of our era, race, culture, or social standing.

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you

look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:3-8).

So far in this book we have discussed recognizing and acknowledging God’s love for us. We highlighted the significant impact the personal apostolate of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph had and continue to have on all humanity as each of us seeks to unite our actions with the Will of God. We examined the many ways God’s love entices us to faith. We also contemplated accepting His love in its many manifestations and the importance of loving Him in return. We considered the role of suffering in our lives, and how our sufferings and triumphs imitate Jesus’ Death and Resurrection. Then we discussed the importance of living holy lives.

This closing chapter focuses on sharing God’s love with others, every day, moment by moment, through the work we do in our personal apostolate. In this way we fulfill God’s greatest commandment to love one another as He loves us. Multiple choices are integrated: acknowledging God’s love, accepting His love, loving Him in return, and loving others. In order for our discipleship to truly follow the Will of God, each of us must acknowledge the contribution that every person ever created makes through their very existence. To do so we must respect and defend every single person’s right to

life. *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself”* (Luke 10:27).

Every person’s apostolate begins at the moment of conception. *“For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed”* (Psalm 139: 13-16).

Before each of us was even born, we already began impacting the lives of others and contributing to their welfare. So much good is accomplished by our very existence! In macroscopic terms, our discipleships come to fruition through our roles as embryos, infants, children, adolescents, adults, and senior citizens. They encompass what we accomplish as students, patients, or retirees, while in training, through various occupations that are paid or unpaid, through volunteering, in sickness and in health. In microscopic terms our apostolate encompasses the many ways we serve God each and every day, from moment to moment.

While some of us love and serve others through what we are able to do physically, personal contributions are not limited to what can be seen by eyes, felt with hands, measured, heard, counted, or quoted. Our contributions may be tangible and have clearly visible results, or may have tremendous

impact while remaining unseen. For example, people who are unable to care for themselves have great purpose and a vital apostolate, and we must give them every opportunity to share their gifts. They provide love in many ways and contribute immensely to humanity. Great things are accomplished through their circumstances because they teach us compassion while fulfilling the Will of God.

The effects of our apostolate do not have to be physically observable to be real. There are great contributions taking place all around us every day that cannot be seen. No one has ever seen God, yet He exists. His love is real. The effect He has on our lives is absolutely real. Just as real is His love resonating through the discipleship of each and every person He ever created. In His encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II stated, “The blood of Christ, while it reveals the grandeur of the Father’s love, *shows how precious man is in God’s eyes and how priceless the value of his life.*”¹⁸

The Christ-likeness of St. Thérèse of Lisieux provides us with a very powerful example of the effects our lives have as followers of Christ when we choose to live and serve in love. St. Thérèse wrote in *Story of a Soul*, “Charity gave me the key to my vocation. I understood that if the Church had a body composed of different members, the most necessary and most moble of all could not be lacking to it, and so I understood that the church had a Heart and that this Heart was BURNING WITH LOVE. I understood it was Love alone that made the Church’s members act...I understand that LOVE COMPRISED ALL VOCATIONS, THAT LOVE WAS EVERYTHING, THAT IT EMBRACED ALL TIMES AND PLACES...IN A WORD,

¹⁸ Pope John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life*, p. 45

THAT IT WAS ETERNAL!”¹⁹ Her vocation, her personal apostolate, was love.

In conclusion it bears repeating: You are very, very special to God. Every single person ever created is special to God! He loves each of us immensely. Imagine how you felt during the most loving moment you have ever had. Multiply that feeling by the largest number you can think of, and you still will not even come close to how much God loves each one of us. At conception each person is gifted by God with striking uniqueness, individual talents, traits, personalities, and an apostolate that changes through the life span as we develop and as our circumstances change. For the sake of our sanctity and the work we accomplish in our imitation of Christ, each of us must recognize, respect, and protect the uniqueness and mutual importance of every other person’s contribution as it was intended by God.

Everyone has something to contribute, for no one was ever created without a purpose. Through our apostolate we return our treasures of self to the infinitely loving God who gave them to us in the first place. We return love for love while serving Him and His people. Our presence, thoughts, desires, words, actions, and inactions give witness to God’s love in our world. May God Bless you for your efforts on His behalf and may your life bring God, you, and others great joy.

19 St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, p. 194

THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

I received the Sacrament of Confirmation in the ninth grade. While preparing for this vital Sacrament, I went through a time of discernment to determine who my patron saint would be. I had no idea who to choose, and properly asked God who He wanted. The word “rose” repeatedly came to mind. I assumed that there is a St. Rose, discovered her, and concluded that St. Rose must be my intended patron. However, the decision did not feel right, so I kept asking.

Shortly thereafter, I learned of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. She promised to continue her personal apostolate from heaven after her death. She said “I will let fall a shower of roses” and responds to prayers for her intercession by sending roses as a sign. Once I learned of her, I found myself drawn to her in a very supernatural way. Certainly she was the one God chose to be my patron saint. On the glorious day of my Confirmation, I took St. Thérèse as my patron saint and friend in heaven.

St. Thérèse has touched my life in countless ways since. In the weeks before my father died, the scent of roses filled the air and I knew that a great trial was near. Years later I asked her to send yellow roses as a sign that my greatly anticipated first child was on his way. When I received a birthday card with a dozen yellow roses on the front, I knew I was expecting, and I was! When my son made his First Eucharist, he wore a yellow boutonniere on his suit to honor her, and to this day we consider yellow roses symbols of life and joy.

Before my marriage ended, I received several signs from St. Thérèse and knew something very significant was going to happen. I was comforted with the knowledge that she was present along with God to help, guide, and comfort me. As she promised, St. Thérèse was continuing her personal vocation of love from heaven. What great love and mercy God expresses to us through His people, including the Saints! What consolation to know that I have such a special ally in heaven.

The intervention of God, Our Blessed Mother, Venerable Fr. Solanus, and others on behalf of the injured motorcyclist mentioned in Chapter 6 is a powerful example of God's love in action. God intervened for the man because He loves him. Our Blessed Mother and Fr. Solanus helped the man because they chose to share God's love. One man called 911 out of love. The people weeping on the sides of the road paid the price required of loving through their grief and compassion for the injured man. I prayed for the man and gave him my scapular in obedience to the call of love. The paramedics and the police came to his assistance because they loved.

The apostolate of each living person is in progress at this very moment. Just as we do not stay the same through our lives, our life's work evolves as we seek to unite our wills to God's promptings. Jesus' apostolate evolved from growing in His mother's womb through His infancy, childhood, young adulthood, and adulthood. He lived in obscurity throughout His life until becoming well known during the three years of His public ministry. He was loved and persecuted, popular and unpopular, loved and hated, returned to Jerusalem a hero at the age of thirty-three and was executed shortly thereafter. Two things remained constant through the different stages of Jesus' life: He

accomplished the Will of His Father and He served others with great love.

Our following of Christ encompasses what we do during the different stages of our lives—as embryos, babies, children, students, employed, unemployed, stay-at-home, religious, whether we are in transition between jobs or careers, whether we are healthy or not, able or disabled—and takes place as long as we live, regardless of our circumstances. Our efforts to increase in sanctity and share the love of God with one another through our discipleship not only benefits each of us individually, but benefits untold other people, including people we may never meet. As Father John A. Harden, S.J., S.T.D. stated on his audiotape, *He Will Come Again to Judge the Living and the Dead*, “No human act is sterile. We are writing history for eternity.”

As tremendous beneficiaries of God’s love in so many diverse ways, through so many different people, so too are we called through our apostolate to bestow upon one another the love of God. So beautiful is His love that it will not be denied and can never be contained. God’s love is extremely contagious! *“I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ”* (Philippians 1:6). Imagine the moment when you will one day stand before God and share with Him the many ways you loved Him in return, directly and by serving others throughout your life. How beautiful that moment will be!

**THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT:
FOR THE READER**

- † How are you faithful to God's greatest commandments to love Him with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself?

Most Compassionate and Loving God,

Please bless us
as we seek to recognize
the many opportunities we have
to grow closer to You
and to each other
during the joys and sorrows
of our lives.

Help us to accept
Your loving offer
of salvation and sanctification,
and guide us as we
serve each other
on the journey toward heaven.

Amen.

**Your Personal Apostolate:
Accepting and Sharing the Love of God**

Questions for Group Discussion

- 1 We Are Loved †** In what ways do you feel God's great love for you?
- 2 Following the Holy Family †** How does the Holy Family inspire you in your own apostolate?
- 3 Called To Faith †** What are three things that have attracted you the most to faith?
- 4 Accepting God's Love †** In what ways have you accepted God's love?
- 5 Loving God Back †** How do you love God in return?
- 6 Sharing Jesus' Passion †** Has suffering impacted your service to God and neighbor?
- 7 His Resurrection and Our Journey †** What events in your own life parallel Jesus' Resurrection?
- 8 The Crucial Role of Sanctity †** What are some things that you can do to increase your sanctity?
- 9 The Greatest Commandment †** How are you faithful to God's greatest commandments to love Him with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself?

Acknowledgements

My dear Lord, I humbly acknowledge the privilege of writing this book as your instrument of love, and pray this work is pleasing in Your Sight. *Vulnera tua merita mea.* All honor and praise to you, Most High Triune God!

I first experienced God's love through my dear parents, Joseph and Herta Bondi. This book began the day they welcomed me, and was formed through their example and sacrifices. My three children, Andre, Nick, and Alyssa, are the joys of my days and continue to teach me not only what it means to be genuinely loving, but how joyful the expression of that love is.

My sister Belinda is limitless in her efforts to share God's love through service to her family and others. My brother Joe, sister-in-law Pam, and nieces Allison and Morgan are witnesses of loving Christian discipleship within the context of a family. I thank my Uncle Jeff and Aunt Mary for having been such wonderful role models by following Christ obediently and with utmost trust. The support and caring from my Aunt Laura reflects the beauty of God's love because of the genuineness of her giving.

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Lastly, I am especially grateful to my beloved Vic, whose invaluable support and help with technology is responsible for the transfer of this book from my heart to the written page. I also offer my indebtedness to my friend and guide St. Thérèse, who continues her personal apostolate of love from heaven.

I thank my God every time I remember you.

—Philippians 1:3

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Michele Elena Bondi

Your Personal Apostolate:

Accepting and Sharing
the Love of God

Each of us has a personal apostolate, or mission, that we fulfill throughout the course of our lives. Our personal apostolate does not begin when we reach a certain age or accomplish a specific goal, nor does it reach its pinnacle when we attain a certain objective. Rather, every apostolate begins the moment a person is created and comes to fruition over time, through all the circumstances of our lives. Our mission is fulfilled in every moment, through every day. Critical to our success is our willingness to accept, return, and share the Love of God.

Your Personal Apostolate: Accepting and Sharing the Love of God provides insight into the importance of each of our efforts and contributions, reminding every person that “God is at work in you!”

“A heartfelt insight into how God weaves in and out of our lives.”

—MICHAEL H. BROWN
Author

“This wonderful book helps make God’s love more evident in our lives. By reflecting on the life of Jesus and how He is made present to us each and every day, Michele encourages each person to use the strength provided by God to live out His plan to the fullest.”

—NANCY CARABIO BELANGER
Author, *Olivia and the Little Way*

