

How to Start A Catholic Spiritual Life

The purpose of this Workbook is not so much to provide knowledge but to help you make a commitment to the Lord to maintain a life-long practice of the sacraments, the moral life, and a life of prayer. If you have decided to pursue a life in Jesus Christ through the Catholic Church (which will *not* disappoint you for an eternity) then it will be necessary to put your flag in the ground and make a commitment to the Lord to participate in the sacraments, the moral life, and prayer for the rest of your life. At the end of this Workbook, you may want to review the commitments given below in Section VI, print it, sign it and mail it to yourself. When it returns, do not open it but keep it in a central place (such as your top drawer) as a lifetime remembrance of your pledge to the Lord. Whenever you see it in that central place let it remind you of what you have done and why you did it.

The following commitments are grounded in the testimony of Jesus and millions of heralded and unheralded saints (some of whom you may already know). Hopefully, their testimony will be sufficient for you to initiate your lifetime practice. If you maintain your commitment to the following three practices (concerning the sacraments, the moral life, and prayer) you will obtain six benefits:

1. Stay and grow on the path of eternal salvation.
2. Be a person of high integrity, authenticity, and trustworthiness.
3. Contribute significantly to your family, friends, community, and Church as well as the Kingdom of God and the culture.
4. Be able to benefit from your suffering and help others to benefit from their suffering (see *The Light Shines on in the Darkness*).
5. Keep the temptations, deceptions, darkness of evil and the evil spirit in check.
6. Have a life and identity filled with ultimate purpose, dignity, and destiny, giving spiritual peace and joy in this lifetime and ultimate happiness and fulfillment with the Lord in the next.

Before addressing the three major commitments for living on Level 4 through the Catholic Church, you may want to purchase a few items which will prove useful throughout your lifetime:

- A Catholic Study Bible with footnotes and explanations. I recommend the following:
 - *The Catholic Study Bible-- NABRE* (Oxford university press 2016 --\$20 US)
 - *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: New Testament—RSV* (Ignatius press \$20 US)
- Two small instructional books on virtue and the 10 Commandments. I would recommend the following:
 - Peter Kreeft, *Back to Virtue: Traditional Moral Wisdom for Modern Moral Confusion* (Ignatius Press 1992--\$13 US)
 - Peter Vaghi 2011 *The Commandments We Keep: A Catholic Guide to Living a Moral Life* (Loyola Press/Ave Maria Press--\$13 US)
- A rosary--along with a pamphlet on the 20 meditations. I recommend the pamphlet “pray the rosary” with illustrations and reflections by Autom--\$4 US. There are many other

pamphlets without illustrations for about .99 cents in the U.S., but we think the illustrations are important.

- A contemporary prayer book such as *Day by Day the Notre Dame Prayer Book for Students* (University of Notre-dame press 2008--\$10 US).
- A wall Crucifix (if you do not already have one).

Though many of these resources are available online with phone apps and kindle, we really recommend purchasing the hard copy book because it will keep you focused on prayer rather than the other options that electronic media may afford (e.g. checking texts). Though the total cost for these resources is \$60 US (plus the cost of the Rosary and Crucifix), it will be the best investment you ever made. After all, it is an investment in your eternal life as well as the salvation of others you touch.

I.

First Area of Commitment: Mass and the Sacrament of Reconciliation

Jesus provided us with two incredibly powerful sacraments capable of absolving us from all sin, transforming us in virtue, freeing us from the grip of evil, healing the effects of past darkness, bringing us deep peace, and leading us towards salvation. These two sacraments bring powerful graces into our lives, and so they lie at the heart of Catholic spiritual life providing a foundation for moral conversion. We will first consider a commitment to Mass and the Holy Eucharist (Section I.A) and then a commitment to the sacrament of reconciliation (Section I.B).

I.A

Mass and the Holy Eucharist

In other website articles, I discuss the major benefits of the Holy Eucharist and participation at Mass. There are five major graces that redeem, heal, and transform us:

1. Spiritual Peace,
2. Forgiveness of venial sins and healing from the effects of evil
3. Transformation in the Heart of Jesus
4. Companionship within the Mystical Body
5. Everlasting life.

After personally affirming the Eucharist (the real Body and Blood of Christ) as your path to salvation, write the following on your list of commitments to the Lord (which we hope you will mail to yourself): “Dear Lord, I will do everything within my power to participate worthily in the Mass every Sunday, and when possible, during some weekdays so that I might stay close to You, be protected from the evil one, and be granted eternal life.”

Resolve now to carry out this commitment by making a goal to find and participate in a parish where you will be fed by the worship, music, homilies, and community. Put participation at mass on your calendar every Sunday for the entire year (it's easy if you have a calendar app on

your phone, and set a reminder) and do not let anyone or anything distract you from carrying out this goal. As you return from Mass you may not notice its effects right away, but over the course of many weeks, you will begin to recognize a greater peace, hope, confidence/trust in God, spiritual wisdom, love of God, and proclivity toward virtue. Do not look for “good feelings,” but rather a long-term transformation in faith, hope, and love.

If you should ever get off the road, make every effort to get back on again by going to the sacrament of reconciliation as soon as possible (see below), then renew your commitment to weekly Mass and put it back on your calendar for all Sundays throughout the Year.

Try to make a network of friends at Mass (perhaps by going to coffee or participating in parish activities) who can give support and loyal friendship and elicit accountability at the parish and beyond. Look for opportunities to participate in retreats and other spiritual activities with those friends which will solidify your spiritual bonds with them.

I.B

The Sacrament of Reconciliation

In other website articles, I explain the benefits of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You might recall the following five benefits leading to absolution and deepening transformation and conversion:

1. Definitive absolution for mortal and venial sins.
2. Spiritual solidification of a turning point in life.
3. Healing of the damage of sin and release from the grip of the evil spirit.
4. Graced resolve for continued conversion.
5. The peace of Christ.

Now write down the following on your list of commitments to mail to yourself: “Dear Lord, I commit to you that I will participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation at least four regular times per year as well as times when I believe I have committed a mortal sin against you. I trust in your unconditional mercy and love, desire your forgiveness and absolution, and resolve to amend my life for the sake of my salvation and to become more like you.”

As always put your four regular confessional times on your calendar (or calendar app—with a reminder):

- Shortly after the new year
- During Lent
- During the late summer
- During Advent

As your calendar shapes up, you may have to move your confessional time around, but the important thing is to solidify four dates at the beginning of the year (or right now if you’re in the middle of the year) and stick to it.

Prepare for your confession by using an examination of conscience. A good one is available in the Notre Dame Prayer Book (in Chapter 6). Additionally, there are suggestions for an examination of conscience at the end of each chapter in Father Vaghi's book (referenced above). For an excellent free examination of conscience, you may want to use the USCCB Examination of Conscience for young people,¹ and the California Youth Examination of Conscience.² The more preparation and reflection you do, the more resolve, peace, and transformation you will have.

It is so easy for us to be focused on family, work, and social obligations, but for the sake of your soul and the people with whom you live and associate, do not let this commitment slip away. If you stick to it you will have no regrets, because its benefits will translate into spiritual peace, transformation of soul, and ultimately salvation.

II. Second Area of Commitment: Ten Virtues and Ten Commandments for Ultimate Sanity, Goodness, Fulfillment, and Salvation

There are consequences of ignoring or abandoning Level 4 purpose in life—spiritual emptiness, alienation, loneliness, and guilt as well as radical incompleteness, underestimation of our dignity and destiny, under-lived life, and increased depression, anxiety, and even suicides. With respect to spiritual guilt (as in Kafka's *The Trial*), we see the need for transcendent grace and forgiveness to bring us out of spiritual guilt and alienation, to peace and wholeness. From this, we can see that our sanity, completeness, and fulfillment are dependent on the moral life (where we try to live by virtue and obedience to God). We might infer from this that it is not enough to participate in church, the sacraments, and a life of prayer. We must also try with the best of our ability (with a partially fallen will) to follow the path of virtue and principles set forth for us by the Son of God, Jesus Christ. If we commit ourselves to this moral life as well as to the church, the sacraments, and prayer, we will find ourselves on the path to true and lasting sanity, goodness, fulfillment, and salvation. Nothing could be more important!

Popular culture (social media, traditional media, movies, books etc.) is undermining Christian morality and even encouraging a lifestyle based on the eight deadly sins—sensorial indulgence, greed, lust, sloth, anger, envy, vanity, and pride.³ This has led to a decline in moral standards among young people (particularly lying, cheating, stealing, bullying, and violence).⁴

From the above, we can say that Jesus' interpretation of the Ten Commandments and the virtues are exceedingly important for purpose and fulfillment in life. If we do not pledge ourselves to these Ten Commandments and ten virtues, we are likely to harm others (particularly those closest to us), harm our spiritual and cultural life, and orient ourselves toward superficiality (at best) and sin, darkness, and the evil spirit (at worst). The reason these commandments and

¹ <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/penance/sacrament-reconciliation-young-adults-examination-of-conscience.cfm>

² <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/good-confession-12656>

³ Carrie James, 2016 *Disconnected: Youth, New Media, and the Ethics Gap* (MIT Press)

⁴ Josephson Institute *The 2012 Report Card of the Ethics of American Youth* <https://charactercounts.org/national-report-card/>

virtues have gained in acceptance and application throughout 3,200 years is their *truth*. They differentiate a good character from an evil one, integrity from disingenuousness, a constructive-contributive life from a destructive-negative one, and true fulfillment and dignity from superficial and transitory fulfillment. At the end of the day, these commandments and virtues will lead us to salvation, and their contrary vices will likely lead to eternal darkness. Given their importance, we will list them below. If you are interested in a much deeper treatment of them with respect to moral conversion, see the Big Book, Volumes 15-17.⁵

Let us begin with the ten virtues needed to counteract the eight deadly sins in our lives. Notice that the ten virtues focus on interior attitudes needed for conversion of the heart, while the Ten Commandments focus on external behaviors and actions needed for love of neighbor, communion with God, and the path to salvation. We might say that if we have integrated the ten virtues into our interior attitudes, our hearts will reflect the heart of God, and the actions flowing from us will, in turn, be consistent with the Ten Commandments. However, even if we have not deeply integrated the virtues into our interior attitudes, we can still be obedient to the Ten Commandments through fear of punishment, desire for salvation, and desire to be in communion with God. Since it is sometimes easier to see the value of the virtues in light of the deadly sins from which they protect us, we will first indicate the deadly sin (Column 1) and then the counteracting virtues that protect us from that sin through the grace of God (Column 2).

The Deadly Sins and Their Counteracting Virtues

Eight Deadly Sins	Counteracting Virtues
Gluttony	Temperance
Greed	Gratitude and generosity
Lust	Temperance, chastity, and care for others
Sloth	Prudence and fortitude
Vanity	Humility and care for others
Anger	Forgiveness and care for others
Envy	Gratitude, justice, and care for others
Pride	Humility, justice, and care for others

As can be seen from the right column of the table there are ten central virtues, four of which were set out by Greek philosophers in the pre-Christian world and six of which were brought to light by Jesus and the Christian Church:

- Four Pre-Christian Natural Virtues: prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude.
- Six virtues (based on charity) brought to light by Jesus Christ and the Church: humility, care for others, forgiveness, gratitude, generosity, and chastity.

⁵ Volume 15 is concerned with the deadly sins and counteracting virtues.
 Volume 16 is concerned with moral conversion
 Volume 17 is concerned with the Ten Commandments, personal ethics, and social ethics.
<https://www.crediblecatholic.com/the-big-book/>

Notice that care for others (what Jesus called “*Agapē*”—empathetic, compassionate, self-sacrificial love for others) is integral to defeating five out of eight deadly sins—lust, vanity, anger, envy, and pride. Little wonder, then, that Jesus made this virtue the highest among all virtues and identified it with His Father and Himself. For a fuller explanation, see the *Credible Catholic Big Book* (Volume 16, Chapter 1).⁶

You may want to memorize these virtues to help you with your weekly examen (explained below), but this is only a first step. If you wish to understand their profound meaning and integrate them into your life, begin by reading Peter Kreeft’s excellent, readable little book, *Back to Virtue* (referenced above). To move even more deeply into the virtues, go to the *Credible Catholic Big Book* (Volumes 15&16).

We now proceed to the Ten Commandments which focus on particular actions that we should or should not do to remain in communion with the Lord and on the path to salvation.

The Ten Commandments

Biblical Expression

1. I am the Lord your God... You shall have no other gods before me.
2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
3. Keep holy the Sabbath Day.
4. Honor thy Father and Mother.

Contemporary Expression

1. Have faith in the Triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) revealed by Jesus Christ as expressed through the Catholic Church, particularly its *Catechism*.⁷
2. God, the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are divine, sacred names that call upon the power and love of God. Misusing them violates and degrades their holiness, love, and power, and risks misusing their transformative love.
3. Make time to receive the Sacraments and to pray so that God, His kingdom, His love, and His commandments will be central to your character, purpose, and fulfillment
4. Do not be disobedient to your Mother and Father (if they ask you to do

⁶ See also Robert Spitzer 2020, *Escape From Evil’s Darkness: The Light of Christ Church, Spiritual Conversion and Moral Conversion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), Ch. 4

⁷ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is free and searchable online.
https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM

morally good actions); be helpful and thankful for their love and the sacrifices they have made for you. Take care of them in their need, sickness, and elderly years.

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| 5. Thou Shalt not kill | 5. Do not unjustly kill or unjustly harm the body, soul, family, reputation, home, or livelihood of any person (from conception to natural death). ⁸ This includes the prohibition of torture, procuring an abortion, libel, assault and battery. |
| 6. Thou shalt not commit adultery | 6. Do not have sexual relations outside of the marriage covenant (including premarital relations, extramarital relations, and same-sex relations). |
| 7. Thou shalt not steal | 7. Do not unjustly steal, deprive or cheat any person of his property, rightful wage, rights to payment on a contract, intellectual property, rightful achievements, or other items of value. |
| 8. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor | 8. Do not unjustly lie about another person's deeds, words, or beliefs. Keep all your promises and, wherever possible, give the best interpretation of peoples' motives and actions (contra-gossip). |
| 9. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife | 9. Do not be envious of anyone's spouse so as to implicitly or explicitly draw that spouse (or yourself) toward infidelity, or even thoughts or desires for infidelity. This undermines the marriage, causing rupture of the marital covenant, harm to children, and harm to their relationship with God. |

⁸ The term "unjustly" here is significant, because Jesus (and the Church) allow for the possibility of a just war (when special conditions are met), police actions to protect the public, actions of self-defense or defense of family which may unintentionally bring about the death of a person perpetrating (or in the midst of perpetrating) an unjust killing of another.

10. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods

10. Do not be envious of your neighbor's property, reputation, talents, achievements, or other comparative advantages, which could set in motion seeds of discontent, anger, bad will, and even harmful actions towards them.

The Ten Commandments are mostly self-evident because most of us can see how violating them causes destruction to others, ourselves, and our relationship with God. Nevertheless, the complexity and propaganda of contemporary popular culture introduce considerable nuances into the discussion of moral theology, which may require some additional reading or study. You might begin this process by reading Fr. Peter Vaghi's book on the Ten Commandments (referenced above). Those wanting even deeper explanations of these commandments as well as social ethics (the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church), may want to consult *The Credible Catholic Big Book* (Vol 17).⁹

Let us return for a moment to the ten virtues and their relationship to the Ten Commandments. Recall that the virtues are concerned with the transformation of our interior attitudes towards the heart of Christ, while the Ten Commandments are concerned with external behaviors and actions. As implied above, virtuous attitudes lead naturally and easily toward adherence to the Ten Commandments. Yet, if someone is not well-formed or well-integrated in the virtues, they can still obey the Commandments out of fear of death and punishment, desire for salvation, and desire for communion with God. Nevertheless, the integration of virtue into our interior attitudes is a much better way to go, because it brings with it several additional advantages. For example, virtue enables us to be just in our actions, positive in our relationship with others, obedient to God, transformed in the Heart of Christ and vouchsafed on our path to salvation. Therefore, it would be prudent to commit ourselves to both the ten virtues and the Ten Commandments.

We must now examine the matter of temptation and how to contend with it. As you probably know we can generate temptations toward evil through our memory and imagination, and this is frequently combined with the power of spiritual evil (e.g., the devil). During these times, it is difficult to keep twenty virtues and commandments at the forefront of our minds. So, what can we do to be vigilant when temptations occur? In a phrase, do the best you can to keep your intentions pure. This is best done by integrating three noble intentions (which can be used in almost any moral situation) into your interior attitude:

1. I desire to please God and follow his will in every dimension of my life out of gratitude for all he has given me, including my eternal soul, my family, redemption through his Son's passion and cross, the privileges and talents he has given me in this life and the path to eternal salvation in the next life.

⁹ <https://www.crediblecatholic.com/pdf/P17/BB17.pdf#P1V17>

2. I desire to enhance the lives of everyone around me, to be fair and contribute to them, and to avoid harming them, particularly their eternal salvation.
3. I desire to promote the cause of God and his light, to defeat the powers of evil and darkness, and to avoid being drawn into the seductions of darkness that prevent me and others from attaining eternal salvation.

Read these three noble intentions carefully and print them for use during your prayer. When you do your morning prayer, *pray* these intentions two or three times by simply prefacing them with “Lord,” and replacing “God” with “you”. Hence the following prayers:

1. *Lord, I desire to please You and follow your will in every dimension of my life out of gratitude for all you have given me, including my eternal soul, my family, redemption through your Son’s passion and cross, the privileges and talents you have given me in this life and the path to eternal salvation in the next life.*
2. *Lord, I desire to enhance the lives of everyone around me, to be fair and contribute to them, and to avoid harming them, particularly their eternal salvation.*
3. *Lord, I desire to promote your cause and light in this world, to defeat the powers of evil and darkness, and to avoid being drawn into the seductions of darkness that prevent me and others from attaining eternal salvation through you.*

You can reduce these three intentions to a short memorable form as follows:

1. Lord, I wish to please you in everything
2. Lord, I do not want to cause harm or jeopardize anyone's salvation
3. Lord, I do not want to be seduced by evil, but instead, promote your cause of goodness.

This last shorter form is particularly important in times of temptation. Try using them the next time you are being tempted by any of the eight deadly sins. As your imagination catches fire and the temptation grows, start praying, “Lord” I only desire to please you in everything: I don’t want to harm anyone’s salvation, and I do not want to be seduced by the evil one.” If you keep praying these petitions, you will see how powerful they are. They actually break the spell of temptation over our imagination and loosen temptations grip on our will. The more meaningfully and often we pray them the stronger they grow until we become quite proficient at defeating temptations at their inception.

How do we pray these noble intentions more meaningfully? In a phrase, by growing in our prayer and spiritual practice. As will become clear (in Section I), the objective of prayer is to grow closer to the Lord in love, hope, and trust. As our relationship with Him grows we become much more grateful for the gifts he gives us, aware and horrified by evil, and desirous of defeating evil and promoting his kingdom. We cannot help ourselves—the more we love him, the more we want to please Him and serve His kingdom. As this happens, we “empower” the three noble intentions, and they can become so strong that they can very quickly break the spell of temptation and keep us on the path to salvation.

If we implement the following two steps, we can grow strong in moral and spiritual transformation.

1. Start praying the three noble intentions at least two or three times per day. When we do this in combination with our examination of conscience (see below) we will be able to confront and defeat temptation frequently and incisively.
2. Dedicate two of your daily prayer sessions per week to an examination of conscience; use the above lists of the ten virtues and the Ten Commandments as the basis for that examination of conscience (explained below in Section III).

The key to resisting temptation and growing in integrity, virtue, and moral conversion is to recognize when temptation is starting and to defeat it incisively through using the three noble intentions. As noted above, we can accomplish both of these tasks by devoting two of our daily prayer sessions per week to an examination of conscience (with three steps):

- Praying the three noble intentions multiples times
- Reviewing the lists of deadly sins, virtues, and commandments
- Evaluating how we are doing in those intentions, virtues, and commandments

This is explained below in Section III.

In addition to the examination of conscience, we will want to build a habit of repentance and forgiveness. If we fail seriously we must be vigilant about going to the sacrament of reconciliation, and if we sin venially, to ask for forgiveness when we receive the body and blood of Christ in the Holy Eucharist (see above Section I). If you maintain your habit of examination of conscience, confession, and Mass, the Lord will work through you in ways you could not have ever imagined, making you an effective church leader, and helping you to help others toward salvation. It will also bring you sanity, goodness, fulfillment, and eternal salvation. I assure you, it will be worth the effort!

We are now ready to add two more commitments to the list in the letter to send to yourself:

- Dear Lord, I will make every effort to make an examination of conscience twice per week so that I might grow strong in the noble intentions, virtue, and self-awareness.
- Dear Lord, I will try my best to pray the three noble intentions quickly, repeatedly, and incisively whenever I am being tempted toward the deadly sins or violation of the commandments.

These two commitments are integrated into a complete list of commitments mentioned below in Section VI of this Workbook.

III.

Third Area of Commitment: A Life of Prayer

This may well be one of the shortest explanations of prayer in the history of spirituality because it is really not an explanation of prayer, but encouragement to commit yourself to prayer. We will here give only a brief explanation of prayer sufficient to get you started. If you follow through on this commitment, you will make many discoveries about the heart, guidance, inspiration, protection, and love of the Lord, which will enable you to grow in your relationship with Him. You may want to get further explanation of prayer, discernment of spirits, and the relationship between spiritual and moral conversion. If so, make a photocopy of the following chapters of two of my books:

- Robert Spitzer 2020, *Escape From Evil's Darkness: The Light of Christ in the Church, Spiritual Conversion, and Moral Conversion (Chapter 3)*—concerned with deepening your spiritual life.
- Robert Spitzer 2015, *Finding True Happiness: Satisfying Our Restless Hearts (Chapter 8)*—concerned with inspiration, guidance, and discernment of spirits.

The objective of this section is to help you make a commitment to fifteen minutes per day of prayer and to provide structure and options for those prayer times. We are providing structure here not to restrict you, but to help you get started, so if you would like to adapt these suggestions to your situation—by making your prayer time ten minutes per day -- or other adaptations, please do so. As St. Ignatius of Loyola would say, if this recommended structure is helpful to building commitment to daily prayer, then use it. If it is not helpful, then modify it until it is helpful. The main thing is to commit yourself to daily prayer, for this is where the miracle of authentic self-transformation in authenticity and spiritual leadership begins.

III.A Getting Started

In order to get started in your prayer life, it will be very helpful to prepare yourself in three areas:

1. Knowing who the Lord is in your heart.
2. Familiarizing yourself with ten spontaneous prayers to be used in times of suffering and when you need assistance.
3. Putting your daily prayer time on your calendar app.

With respect to the first step, knowing the heart of the Lord, I would recommend reading the website article on The Father of the Prodigal Son immediately after finishing this Workbook. It gives Jesus' definitive revelation of His Father's Heart which should be your guide for the rest of your spiritual life. There are many false notions of God—such as the payback god, the disgusted god, the angry god, the terrifying god, the boss god and the stoic god—which stand in the way of developing your relationship with the Lord. These false notions of God should be replaced by Jesus' image of the Father of the Prodigal Son. For a fuller explanation of these false notions of

God, see the *Credible Catholic Big Book* (Volume 4, Chapter 7).¹⁰ It is important to gain clarity and conviction about the unconditional love of God before proceeding to the other steps for developing your life of prayer.

The next preparatory step is to become deeply familiar with some spontaneous prayers to help you in times of need and suffering. Spontaneous prayers—short, memorable, incisive prayers—are truly excellent ways of bringing the Lord’s grace into our suffering when we really need it! They can be repeated again and again until you sense the Lord’s presence and grace bringing peace and confidence to diminish fear, anxiety, and resentment when the cross inserts itself into our lives. I have seen these positive effects many times when I have repeated several of these spontaneous prayers, particularly, “Lord, push back the foreboding,” “Lord, I give up; You take care of it,” and “Thy loving will be done.”

As you begin, get a sense of the meaning and power of these prayers by reading (and re-reading) the spontaneous prayers given below in Section IV. Once you have some familiarity with the prayers, make a photocopy of them, and start using them. The more you use them, the more firmly engrained they will be in your memory which will enable you to recall them when you really need them in times of suffering, need, forgiveness, prayer for enemies, and contemplation.

Our third preparatory point is simple—access your calendar app and enter a daily repeatable calendar event for ten to fifteen minutes of daily prayer in the morning (or the evening), for example, fifteen minutes before you would normally leave for school or work. If this means waking up fifteen minutes earlier, please do it. Remember—the more you practice daily prayer, the deeper will be your relationship with the Lord which will, in turn, strengthen your faith, hope, and love (in ways you may or may not immediately recognize) as well as your awareness of His guidance, inspiration, and protection in your life. As you will see, it will transform the quality of your relationship with others, work, and other endeavors as well as the kind of recreation you pursue, the conversations you have, the goals you make, and the kind of person you are becoming. This transformation process can be quite subtle and slow, but do not misjudge it, for you will find yourself naturally gravitating toward different friends, movies, social media content, and websites. As noted above, daily prayer will also help you resist temptation and the eight deadly sins, thereby strengthening you in the ten virtues and the Ten Commandments. In the long run, daily prayer will decrease your sense of spiritual emptiness, loneliness, alienation, and guilt, leading to greater sanity, integrity, fulfillment, dignity, peace, and joy (even at times of great challenge and suffering). Most importantly, daily prayer will keep you on the path to salvation. As virtually every saint has proclaimed—“prayer never fails!”

III.B

Structuring Your Prayer

¹⁰ See the *Credible Catholic Big Book* Volume IV <https://www.crediblecatholic.com/pdf/M4/BB4.pdf#P1V4C7>
For a detailed scriptural explanation for false notions of God, see Robert Spitzer 2017, *The Light Shines Out in the Darkness: Transforming Suffering Through Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press) Ch. 2

Remember—if this structure is not useful to you, disregard these instructions. However, if they have even partial use, modify them to fit your life and goals. The main thing is to pray every day (when possible) for ten to fifteen minutes—preferably fifteen minutes. As noted above, split your weekly prayer days into two parts:

- Five days for “relationship prayer”—say, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday
- Two days for “Examination of Conscience”—say, Wednesday and Saturday

Before giving a structure for relationship prayer, please consider two important points—the primacy of consecrating time to the Lord and dealing with distractions. First and most importantly, the purpose of prayer is to deepen your relationship with the Lord—not to follow a recommended structure. Therefore, it is irrelevant whether you finish all the recommended parts of your prayer time—or follow the structure rigidly, loosely, or not at all. The only thing that matters is that you consecrate your fifteen minutes to *being with the Lord* so that you can draw closer to Him and allow Him to draw closer to you.

Do not expect good feelings, no feelings, or bad feelings during your prayer. Feelings can occur because of God’s purpose, the mood of the moment, anticipated challenges or joys of the day, or a myriad of other causes. Thus, feelings do not necessarily correlate with the real purpose and fruits of prayer. As implied above the purpose of prayer is to consecrate time to the Lord so that He can transform us interiorly (according to His timing), guide us, inspire us, strengthen us, and lead us to our salvation with Him. These objectives sometimes (but not always) correlate with what might be called consolation (a sense of joy and peace in the presence of God).

However, there might also be times of desolation (a sense of darkness or emptiness seemingly distant from God), or something in-between or no feelings at all. If God wills it, He can coordinate consolation with interior transformation and guidance—or use desolation to get to the same end.¹¹ You can be sure that God will bring good effects out of your prayer irrespective of whether you sense consolation, desolation or nothing—whether prayer is easy, difficult, or a desert. When you consecrate time to the Lord and do your best to stay focused, even amidst distraction, He will transform you, guide you, inspire you, strengthen you and lead you to heaven. There is a universal adage about the spiritual life—*many of the fruits of prayer are unfelt and come outside of prayer*. Not a single saint (amidst the thousands who have graced the history of the Catholic Church) would disagree with this fundamental statement.

We now approach the topic of distraction. As with feelings, distractions have many causes. Some come from the conscious mind—a challenging upcoming day, a worry about a family member or a relationship in the workplace, trying to find a solution to a difficult question, etc. Other causes originate in the subconscious mind—a subconscious fear of God or guilt about a past event provoking a desire to escape from His presence—or perhaps a sense of spiritual emptiness or boredom, causing our minds to wander toward random thoughts and images. Still, other causes may originate with the Evil Spirit (or a combination of the subconscious and Evil Spirit) tempting us toward the deadly sins to which we are most vulnerable. Whatever the cause—don’t worry! Just remember, so long as you have consecrated your time to the Lord and

¹¹ This is explained in *Escape from Evil’s Darkness* (Ch. 3).

are trying to keep your focus on Him, the distractions that may come into your mind are often not within your control.

The distractions coming from the conscious mind are most easily controlled by us, but the ones coming from the subconscious mind and the Evil One are not. On days when we are not fixated by problems at work or home and can sense the Lord's presence clearly, distractions from the subconscious mind and the Evil One can be easily pushed aside. However, when the opposite conditions prevail, we can expect little success in dealing with distraction. If your prayer is filled with distraction, please do not think that your prayer is (or was) worthless or that God does not care about you. Above all, do not discontinue your prayer. Keep powering through as best you can until your fifteen minutes is completed, and expect that the Lord will bring fruit out of your prayer whenever He wills it—both hidden interior fruit and external providential guidance, soon after or long after your prayer time is finished.

We might sum up by saying that our job in prayer is to consecrate our time to the Lord and try our best to stay focused on Him, irrespective of whether there is consolation or desolation—or distraction or clarity. The Lord will then do His part—to provide interior transformation, inspiration, guidance, strengthening, and the path to eternal life. Outside of prayer we may want to consider our sense of consolation or desolation in light of St. Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, but this topic is beyond our purpose here. Interested readers may consult the *Credible Catholic Big Book* (Volume 15).¹²

We will now consider a possible structure for “relationship prayer,” and then, in the next Section (III.C) an option for structuring your examination of conscience. I recommend the following two-part structure for prayer to deepen your relationship with the Lord. I have recommended this structure to many directees and viewers on my media programs with considerable positive feedback:

1. Introduction to help connect with the Lord who is present and loves you.
2. Select one of the three options for formal prayer given below.

(1) *First step -- Introduction to Relationship Prayer*

It is important to get connected with the Lord as we come to prayer. I can think of no better way to do this than the simple prayer, “Lord, I know you are here; I know you love me, and I know you are guiding me away from darkness into your loving light; I love you too.” This can be adjusted to focus on the Father, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, or Blessed Mary. Hence you could say, “Heavenly Father, I know you are here...” or “Lord Jesus, I know you are here...” or “Holy Spirit...” or “Blessed Mary...” You may want to repeat this prayer a few times until you have a sense of their presence to you. Do not think for a moment that you are convincing yourself of their presence, because they really are present. You don't have to convince yourself of anything – simply acknowledge that they are there. In fact, this whole universe is a thought in the Trinity's unrestricted act of thinking, and therefore, their presence pervades everything. In view of this, you can be sure that they hear your prayer and are present right next to you. You can also be sure

¹² <https://www.crediblecatholic.com/pdf/P15/BB15.pdf#P1V15>

that they love you irrespective of whether you have fallen into sin—even seriously. They are like the Father of the prodigal son—they are happy you are back in prayer and are trying to reconnect with them. Yes—they are not happy about your sinfulness. Indeed, they are very concerned about it, and they will find ways both interiorly and exteriorly to lead you out of it. If their guidance is to be effective, you will need to cooperate with it, and the best way to do this, is to stick to your prayer commitment of ten to fifteen minutes per day, make at least one (and hopefully two) examinations of conscience each week, and go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation whenever you see yourself slipping into mortal sin. Bearing this in mind, you can be sure of the truth of your opening prayer – “Lord, I know you are here, I know you love me, and I know you are guiding me out of darkness into your loving light; I love you too.”

There is yet another adage in the spiritual life: *a person can be both sinning and praying, but this will not last long. Eventually, he/she will have to give up one of them.* If we do not try to move away from sin and darkness, our prayer life will not only be difficult, but of negligible meaning to us. Eventually we will simply forget about it. Conversely, if we do try to follow the inspiration of the Lord to move beyond sin, our prayer will become more important to us, and reinforce our journey away from darkness into the light of Christ. Though moving toward the light may appear challenging and difficult to reach, it will grow easier and very fruitful if you resolve to continue praying and to move beyond sinful inclinations. Beginning the life of prayer is the most challenging time, but it will become more inviting and less challenging as you progress. As you deepen your relationship with the Lord through your prayer commitment, it will become increasingly transformative – and if you combine it with frequent reception of the Holy Eucharist, the Lord will accelerate this transformation.

(2) Selecting Some Common Prayers

There are some excellent resources for prayer developed throughout the centuries since the time of Jesus. The most frequently used prayers are as follows:

- *The Rosary*—five decades of Hail Mary’s, an Our Father and a Glory Be
- *Lectio Divina*—Meditating on passages of the New Testament (particularly the mass readings of the day)
- *Traditional and contemporary common prayers*—from a variety of prayer books (such as the above recommended *Notre Dame Prayer Book*).
- *Breviary*—Psalms and other prayers arranged in seasons and Saints’ feasts—prayed daily by priests, religious, and others.

I will give a brief explanation and some recommendation for each resource area, and then address the topic of conversing with the Lord in prayer. The most important thing to remember is if you are moved to enter into conversation with the Lord while praying from the above resources, then follow this call. Talk to the Lord about what is on your heart or ask the questions that are coming into your mind – and do not worry about finishing the prayer (or prayers) you had anticipated doing.

The first approach to everyday prayer is **the rosary**, which originated with St. Dominic in the thirteenth century and has been a mainstay of individual and community prayer in the

Catholic Church for over 700 years. Though you might at first shy away from the five-fold repetition of Hail Mary's, Our Fathers, and Glory Be's, I would urge you to take this devotion seriously. You don't have to say the whole rosary. You can say one or two decades by themselves or follow them up with other prayers. It is a tremendous way to focus your heart on the presence of Mary, the Father, and Jesus, as well as to meditate on the essential mysteries of the Life of Jesus and Mary. Virtually every saint and pope after the time of St. Dominic had a special devotion to it, and many wrote books and pamphlets about its grace-filled and peaceful transformative power. You may want to purchase a small book on the rosary or an illustrated pamphlet relating it to relevant scripture passages,¹³ and then begin praying it. Give it a chance to become a conduit of the Lord's grace and Mary's peace in your life. Additionally, you may want to form a rosary group with some of your friends through an online group chat to pray on a regular basis.

Some of you may not feel inclined to pray to Mary, but I would unhesitatingly recommend that you try it before rejecting it. There is considerable evidence to justify her efficacious presence from contemporary, scientifically validated miracles (see the *Credible Catholic Big Book*, Vol. II, Ch. 9) as well as the testimony of hundreds of saints and popes who have written about her love and peace in their lives. Furthermore, there is considerable literature devoted to the history and justification of the Marian Doctrines that sprang up in the Church at the end of the first century (see the summary of this literature in the *Credible Catholic Big Book* Vol. 12, Ch. 4). If you are not familiar with Mary (or devotion to her), you may want to begin by viewing a film called *The Song of Bernadette*,¹⁴ which may help you grasp the deeply affectionate, peaceful, gentle, beautiful, and familial quality of her presence and love. Once you begin praying to her (who always deeply reveals the heart of her Son), you will find a true source of consolation, particularly at times of challenge and suffering.

A second approach to everyday prayer is **Lectio Divina**. A good way to begin is to download the app for the United States Council of Catholic Bishops' daily Mass readings onto your smartphone.¹⁵ You can simply click on the app, and you will not only get the readings but other devotional materials. The traditional Benedictine practice of *Lectio Divina* has been adapted to contemporary needs and audiences in many ways. In all its adaptations it retains four major steps:

1. Reading a passage of scripture
2. Reflecting on that passage to see how it affects *our heart*
3. Praying about how this passage speaks to *our lives*
4. Contemplatively entering into the call of Christ in the passage.

Notice that *Lectio Divina* is not concerned with scripture scholarship but rather with how a passage of scripture challenges us to become more like Christ and to enter into that challenge

¹³ I recommend the pamphlet "pray the rosary" with illustrations and reflections by Autom--\$4 US https://www.amazon.com/Autom-Father-Prayers-Rosary-Instructions/dp/B00E5JE3YQ/ref=sr_1_4?keywords=how+to+pray+the+rosary&qid=1583448807&sr=8-4

¹⁴ Click on the following YouTube link to view the entire film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6zAoq8tRfI>

¹⁵ Google Playstore Link: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.aycka.apps.MassReadings>
Apple App Store Link: <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/laudate-1-catholic-app/id499428207>

with Christ. In it, we want to hear the call of Christ to us *personally*, in our *hearts*, to discover where he might be *calling* us. Many excellent books are devoted to this practice, and so I will not address it more specifically here. A particularly good book for beginners is Tim Gray's *Praying Scripture for a Change: An Introduction to Lectio Divina*.¹⁶

A third approach to everyday prayer is **traditional and contemporary common prayers**, which are available in various Catholic prayer books. As noted above, an excellent, affordable prayer book for young people is the prayer book of Notre Dame University called *Day by Day the Notre Dame Prayer Book for Students*.¹⁷ It is split into nine sections, which can provide content for your daily prayer. I recommend that you read through each section thoughtfully and select about twenty prayers that respond best to your life situation and connect you with the Lord. Put a small paper clip or some other indicator of that prayer on the top of your prayer book so you can refer to your favorites quickly. After doing this, take a moment before you begin your prayer to consider what kind of day you have had (or are about to have), your temporal needs (e.g., help on an exam, help with a relationship), and spiritual needs (e.g., for forgiveness of sins, help in times of suffering, thanksgiving, growing closer to the Lord, etc.); then select two or three prayers that you can pray once or twice during your prayer period. You may also want to add some of the spontaneous prayers given below in Section IV, which are explained on the Magis Center website.¹⁸ As you come to the end of your prayer period, express your temporal and spiritual needs to the Lord one more time, entrusting them to His way and timing for leading you through your challenges, suffering, hopes, and fears.

A fourth approach, used mainly by priests and religious, is the Breviary, which gives a variety of Psalms, and Old and New Testament Canticles. It is accompanied by additional prayers as well as readings from scripture. Some people prefer to have a more contemporary rendering of Psalms and reflections, which are provided in a publication called *Magnificat*. You may want to download their app (which provides you with the Mass readings, abridged psalms for morning and evening prayer, and contemporary reflections to develop your spiritual life). You can order it delivered to your home in a nice paperback edition (coming once per month) or download their app, which is quite affordable.¹⁹

The above four forms of everyday prayer can be quite moving by themselves, but oftentimes they can engender an insight, a question, but most importantly, a conversation with the Lord. If you feel called to ask or say something to the Lord—or to pour your heart out to Him—follow that call, because it may well be the Holy Spirit leading you.

As you tell the Lord what's on your mind, listen to the little thoughts in the back of your mind or your feelings. The Lord frequently responds to us through these means. Sometimes, as you are telling the Lord what's on your heart, you may feel a pull toward or away from a

¹⁶ See also Dr. Tim Gray 2009 *Praying Scripture for a Change: An Introduction to Lectio Divina* (Ascension Press).

¹⁷ *Day by Day The Notre Dame Prayer book for Students* University of Notre-dame press 2008--\$10 US

¹⁸ Go to magiscenter.com, click on resources, then on Articles and Videos, and select, "Getting Started on Prayer," <https://magiscenter.com/getting-started-on-prayer-spontaneous-prayers/>

¹⁹ At the moment available only on the Apple store at \$2/month U.S. for fourteen books—special supplements for Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter. Apple Store link: <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/magnificat-us-edition/id363526415>

particular course of action. Bring this to the forefront of your mind, and simply ask the Lord, “is this what you want me to do?” or “Are you telling me to move in this direction?” If you feel even the slightest nudge in that direction, follow where the Lord is leading you.

Sometimes you will feel a sense of deep emptiness, loneliness, and guilt (desolation). This may or may not be from the Lord. First, use the spontaneous prayer, “Lord, push back this foreboding/desolation,” several times. If the foreboding/desolation increases (instead of decreasing), then ask the Lord to lead you to the conduct, habit, or actions that He would like you to change. Quite often, you will get a little insight in the back of your mind that gives you the direction to go. Prepare a plan with “small steps” to start changing those behaviors, and above all, plan to go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation as soon as you can reasonably manage it.

III.C Structuring Your Examination of Conscience

As noted above, it is important to devote one or two days per week to doing an examination of conscience. This will mean replacing your conversational-everyday prayer with what the Jesuits call, “the Examen.” Virtually every Christian Spiritual Master explicitly recognized the importance of this contemplation on our sinfulness, because it is so easy to succumb to temptation (particularly in our internet and social media culture). When we assent to temptation, it can grip us and become habitual before we even know what is happening. Furthermore, we can slip out of good habits—missing our daily prayer session and forgetting easily accomplished fraternal charity (such as helping someone in need or befriending a person who’s ignored). We should not take this, “slip into darkness” lightly, because it opens us to still greater temptation from the evil spirit and solidifies habits of sin that are deleterious to us and others. The best way of staying on track is to be intentional—purposeful—about an examination of conscience. The following three-step procedure is easy to remember and implement:

- 1) Before reflecting on your sin, ask the Lord to give you openness to see where He is calling you, where you need improvement, and the grace to follow through on this improvement in the future.
- 2) Second step: consideration of the three noble intentions and your sins
 - Review the three noble intentions:
 - *Lord, I desire to please You and follow your will in every dimension of my life out of gratitude for all you have given me, including my eternal soul, my family, redemption through your Son’s passion and cross, the privileges and talents you have given me in this life and the path to eternal salvation in the next life.*
 - *Lord, I desire to enhance the lives of everyone around me, to be fair and contribute to them, and to avoid harming them, particularly their eternal salvation.*
 - *Lord, I desire to promote your cause and light in this world, to defeat the powers of evil and darkness, and to avoid being drawn into the seductions of darkness that prevent me and others from attaining eternal salvation through you.*

- Review of your sins. Choose one of the following documents to help you review your sins:
 - The list of deadly sins and commandments (given below in Section IV).
 - Examination of conscience in Notre Dame Prayer Book (Chapter 6).
 - The USCCB examination of conscience for young people.²⁰
 - The California Youth Examination of Conscience.²¹

As you are going through the questions on the examination of conscience, make a little note of the sins that pertain to you. If they are serious sins, then resolve to go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation as soon as possible. If they are not serious, but getting stronger and more influential in your life, proceed to step 3.

- 3) Ask the Lord for forgiveness for your sins by making a good act of contrition. ²² If you noticed that one or more sins are becoming stronger and habitual, make a plan to back out of it. Start with small steps but follow them up with slightly larger steps until you can sense some partial detachment from that sin. Do not get discouraged with repeated failures! Keep asking for forgiveness and keep following your small and medium steps to break those sinful habits. You will not regret it. For you will become a virtuous person, break the grip of your spiritual enemy, and come closer to the Lord in your conversational-everyday prayer. Remember, if you are committing serious sins, pray the act of contrition (with firm purpose of amendment) and get to the Sacrament of Reconciliation as soon as you can.

IV. Three Resources for Prayer

The following three resources have been referred to throughout Sections II & III:

- 1) Spontaneous prayers to catalyze grace when you really need it.
- 2) The eight deadly sins and the virtues which combat them.
- 3) A contemporary interpretation of the Ten Commandments.

These prayers are so central to your conversational-everyday prayer and your examination of conscience that I recommend you photocopy them for easy access during your prayer.

²⁰ <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/penance/sacrament-reconciliation-young-adults-examination-of-conscience.cfm>

²¹ <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/good-confession-12656>

²² Oh my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended thee, and I detest all my sins because they offend thee my God who art all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve with the help of thy grace to sin no more and avoid the near occasion of sin. Amen.

Spontaneous Prayers

Prayers in time of need and suffering

“Help!”

“Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with thee...”

“Lord, if it is your will, take this suffering away from me, but if not, then Thy loving will be done.”

“Lord, push back this darkness/foreboding” (repeat often until darkness subsides)

“Lord, make good come out of this suffering for me, others, and your Kingdom.”

“I give up, Lord! You take care of it.”

“Lord, I offer up this suffering to you for the intention of...”

“Thy loving will be done.” (repeat often until fear/anxiety subsides)

Prayers for Forgiveness

“Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am a sinful man/woman”

“Lord, I accept your forgiveness.”

“Lord, make good come out of whatever harm I might have caused.”

Prayers for the Forgiveness of Offenders and Enemies

“Lord, You are the just Judge; You take care of this offender/situation.”

“Lord, please bless this offender/enemy, bringing him/her closer to yourself.”

Spontaneous Prayers to Start Contemplation

“Lord (Father, Son, or Holy Spirit)—or Mary, I know you are here, and that You love me. I love You too.”

“Lord, I thank you for all you have given me—my immortal soul, my family, friends, talents, faith, redemption, guidance, inspiration, protection, and above all, eternal life in You. Help me to respond to you in love.”

The Deadly Sins and Their Counteracting Virtues

Eight Deadly Sins Counteracting Virtues

Gluttony	Temperance
Greed	Gratitude and generosity
Lust	Temperance, chastity, and care for others
Sloth	Prudence and fortitude
Vanity	Humility and care for others
Anger	Forgiveness and care for others
Envy	Gratitude, justice, and care for others
Pride	Humility, justice, and care for others

The Ten Major Virtues

Four Natural Virtues:

Prudence, Justice, Temperance, and courage/fortitude

Six Virtues Connected with Love/Charity Brought to Light by Jesus:

Care for others, Gratitude, Humility, Forgiveness, Generosity, and Chastity

Ten Commandments

Biblical Expression	Contemporary Expression
1. I am the Lord your God... You shall have no other gods before me.	1. Have faith in the Triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) revealed by Jesus Christ as expressed through the Catholic Church, particularly its <i>Catechism</i> .
2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.	2. God, the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are divine, sacred names that call upon the power and love of God. Misusing them violates and degrades their holiness, love, and power, and risks misusing their transformative love.
3. Keep holy the Sabbath Day.	3. Make time to receive the Sacraments and to pray so that God, His kingdom, His love, and His commandments will be central to your character, purpose, and fulfillment.
4. Honor thy Father and Mother.	4. Do not be disobedient to your Mother and Father (if they ask you to do morally good actions); be helpful and thankful for their love and the sacrifices they have made for you. Take care of them in their need, sickness, and elderly years.
5. Thou Shalt not kill	5. Do not unjustly kill or unjustly harm the body, soul, family, reputation, home, or livelihood of any person (from conception to natural death). This includes the prohibition of torture, procuring an abortion, libel, and assault and battery.
6. Thou shalt not commit adultery	6. Do not have sexual relations outside of the marriage covenant (including premarital relations, extramarital relations, and same-sex relations).
7. Thou shalt not steal	7. Do not unjustly steal, deprive or cheat any person of his property, rightful wage, rights to payment on a contract, intellectual property, rightful achievements, or other items of value.
8. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor	8. Do not unjustly lie about another person's deeds, words, or beliefs. Keep all your promises and, wherever possible, give the best interpretation of peoples' motives and actions (contra-gossip).
9. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife	9. Do not be envious of anyone's spouse so as to implicitly or explicitly draw him/her (or yourself) toward infidelity, or thoughts or desires for infidelity. This undermines the marriage, causing rupture of the marital covenant, harm to children, and harm to their relationship with God.
10. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods	10. Do not be envious of your neighbor's property, reputation, talents, achievements, or other comparative advantages, which could set in motion seeds of discontent, anger, bad will, and even harmful actions towards them.

V. **Two Ways to Enhance Your Spiritual Life**

As you progress in your spiritual life, you may want to expand the ways in which you communicate and relate to the Lord. Every major spiritual tradition in the Church (from St. Benedict to St. Dominic to St. Francis and to St. Ignatius) unanimously suggests the prayer of gratitude (Section V.A). Gratitude enables us to recognize blessings and love, which in turn brings us closer to the Lord, eliciting deeper love for Him.

Another important way to deepen our love for the Lord is through spiritual reading – particularly autobiographies of saints as well as spiritual tractates about Jesus and the spiritual life. When we recognize the deep love and trust for God manifest in the autobiographies of saints, it rubs off on us. We literally put on the mind and heart of these saints which brings us closer to the One they love. I give some recommendations of excellent spiritual books that have laid the groundwork for profound prayer for tens of thousands of Catholics throughout the centuries (Section V.B).

V.A **The Prayer of Gratitude**

As you advance in your conversational everyday prayers, you will likely feel moved to make your prayer more personal, interpersonal, and affectionate. When this happens, substitute the following prayer of gratitude for two of your weekly prayer sessions. Do not substitute it for your examination of conscience, but only for conversational everyday prayers. The prayer of gratitude moves us toward an awareness of being loved and the desire to love the one who loves us, which brings us closer to Him.

Gratitude is the recognition that we have been blessed beyond what we have earned—blessed because of the goodness, generosity, and love of someone who cares about us. It is also a way to express our appreciation and love in return for that generosity and goodness. Thus, gratitude takes nothing for granted and expresses appreciation and love for blessings received. Inasmuch as gratitude helps us acknowledge how much we have been loved and incites our love for the one who loves us, it is the perfect contemplative prayer that deepens our relationship with the beloved—the Lord. The more grateful we are, the more we know God’s love for us, and the more we love Him in return.

The prayer of gratitude has two parts:

- 1) Gratitude for recent specific blessings.
- 2) Gratitude for general long-term (lifetime) blessings.

Recent specific blessings are often easy to recall, but we should still make a note of them so that we can express our gratitude multiple times. This includes good turns of events at work, in the family, in our community-social life, and above all in our church and spiritual life. When we begin our life of prayer, it is easier to recognize temporal blessings than spiritual ones because

we do not yet appreciate the true eternal value and love in spiritual conversion (relationship with the Lord in Sacraments and prayer) and moral conversion (resistance to temptation and growth in virtue and holiness). However, when we remain faithful to our Sacramental commitments, prayer, and examination of conscience, we will shift our priority from temporal to spiritual blessings. Spiritual blessings are frequently intangible, interior, and long term which at first don't seem to compare favorably with more tangible blessings like a promotion, a new car, honors or recognition from the human community. As we mature and progress in prayer, we begin to recognize the much greater and deeper value of transformation in virtue and charity, depth of faith, and closeness to the Lord of Eternal Joy and love. Even though spiritual blessings sometimes involve desolation, discipline, hardship, and the cross, we gladly endure and even pursue these things, because we know it will lead us closer to our true selves, authentic relationships with others, and eternal salvation. As this occurs, we see the Lord's loving and guiding hand in our process of conversion which incites us toward gratitude and love for Him. In light of this, you may want to organize your prayer of gratitude in three points:

- 1) Recent, specific temporal blessings you have received.
- 2) Recent, specific spiritual blessings you have received (which may have involved desolation, hardship, or the cross, but is leading you closer to the Lord and eternal salvation).
- 3) General blessings (occurring over long-term periods or a lifetime):
 - a) For being created with our unique eternal soul.
 - b) For our redemption by Jesus, saving us from the powers of darkness and bringing us to eternal life.
 - c) For our family and friends.
 - d) For our talents, skillsets, and opportunities to advance spiritually or temporally.
 - e) For the Sacraments, community, and guidance of the Church that help us towards salvation.
 - f) For the beauty and goodness of the creation around us.
 - g) For the past guidance, inspiration and protection of the Holy Spirit that protected us from disasters, superficiality, and a life of darkness, and inspired and guided us toward our intellectual, spiritual, and moral conversion—the path to salvation.

I have found it quite helpful to put together a little book of gratitude that fills out these areas for which to be grateful. Frequently, I cannot remember recent specific blessings during my prayer, and so I take out this little four-page “book” and read through it.

While you are recollecting and thanking the Lord for His blessings, if you are moved to expressions of great appreciation and love, stay with that particular blessing. The more deeply we feel gratitude, the more deeply we love and the more deeply we love, the closer we draw to the Beloved—building a relationship that will endure and increase throughout eternity. As you advance in prayer, you may want to make a small reflection on gratitude part of your daily prayer. As you do this, you will find yourself recognizing more and more spiritual blessings which probably came through some form of deprivation, desolation, or suffering. Notice as you grow that you count and fear the cross less and less, focusing more on the spiritual blessing coming through the cross. Notice also how much more you value these spiritual blessings as you mature in your relationship with the Lord – blessings such as humility, detachment from the

world, trust and desire to follow the will of God, even at great cost, patience and compassion for those who cannot repay (or might even dislike us), and deepened affection, trust, and love of the Lord, His way, and His light. This is precisely what it means to grow in holiness or righteousness.

Do not be afraid of the cross! The Lord will allow these crosses only in ways you can endure and integrate in your life. Yes – when a new cross is presented, you will probably, like most people, be overwhelmed, fearful, and anxious. Again, don't worry! I have been through this many times, and I can assure you that the Lord is providing a way for you to benefit spiritually (and sometimes temporally) from that cross. Trust Him in the midst of your uncertainty and anxiety, let Him create a path for you into His light and goodness. You may not find immediate alleviation of your cross – and sometimes you may find only a partial alleviation of it, but I assure you that the spiritual blessings described above will begin to emerge, and in your spiritual maturity, you will see the true blessing in them for increased humility, charity, and faith. These blessed crosses will detach us from our egocentricity, protect us from our spiritual enemy (Satan), bring us closer to the Lord in love, and vouchsafe us on the path to salvation. Please know that the cross is worth it, for it leads assuredly to salvation. Remember salvation is eternal while in comparison, this life is but an imperceptible moment. Resolve now as you begin your life of spiritual growth to trust totally in the Lord, take up your cross, and follow in His footsteps (Mt. 16:24).

V.B **Spiritual Reading**

The most important spiritual reading is, of course, the Bible, with particular emphasis on the New Testament Gospels and Epistles. Though the Bible is open to interpretation by everyone, it is by no means self-evident (as can be seen in the hundreds of thousands of interpretations given to its passages). In view of this, I would recommend studying a particular Gospel or Epistle, with an annotated Catholic study bible (such as the two recommended in the Introduction to this Workbook²³).

If readers are not very familiar with the New Testament Gospels, I would recommend starting your scripture reading with a life of Christ. I recommend the one by Fulton J. Sheen, *The Life of Christ* (Martino Fine Books -- \$6.00 U.S.).

There is another resource on the life, meaning, and significance of Jesus which provides a profound and penetrating explanation of His Sonship, mission, and redemption of humankind – Romano Guardini's, *The Lord*.²⁴ Every chapter (and nearly every page of every chapter) has profound insights into the mind and heart of our Savior and is as valid today as when he wrote it (1959). It has influenced theologians and clergy of three generations, including Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. It comes as close to representing the true divine-human Savior as any

²³ *The Catholic Study Bible-- NABRE* (Oxford university press 2016 --\$20 US)
The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: New Testament—RSV (Ignatius press \$20 US)

²⁴ Romano Guardini, *The Lord* (Longman -- \$17.00 U.S. and available as an audio book).

book I have ever read. It should be a priority for those seeking a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ.

Another way to enhance your spiritual life is to imitate the saints and spiritual masters who have preceded us. Many of them left autobiographies and spiritual writings that can truly deepen our relationship with the Lord. The advice given by these spiritual masters may not be directly applicable to your life, but reading or hearing their advice helps us to see the Lord as they saw him – His call, way of guiding, deep love and compassion for us, and His modes of communication. Most importantly is their recognition of His deep love for us (even when we are sinning), and their deep love for Him in response. If we allow their voices to echo in our hearts, we cannot help but assimilate some of their profound awareness of His healing, forgiving, consoling love, especially when we are suffering. Some people prefer to listen to spiritual classics read to them rather than read them. If you are one of those people, consider downloading an app for audio books on your smartphone or computer. All the books recommended below are in audio as well as written format.

In my view, the following six spiritual autobiographies are the best way to continue with spiritual reading. Most of them are several centuries old, but they present penetrating insights into the love of God and the spiritual discipline we will need to detach ourselves from egocentricity and sensuality. This kind of detachment is essential to open ourselves to the love of God, transform our hearts, and give His love away to others.

Perhaps the most important spiritual classic for entering into the love of God is the *Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila*.²⁵ Though she uses images that may be a little foreign to us, she is very explicit about growth in prayer, the love of God, her love of Jesus, and the humility and fortitude needed for the spiritual life. These important dimensions of spiritual growth are interwoven into her life's story which makes it interesting and accessible. It may require two or more readings to gain optimal fruit, but as you will see, it will change your attitude toward the Lord and prayer, which will initiate a journey you will never regret.

The second spiritual autobiography may be more appreciated by those with an interest in philosophy and theology – the *Confessions of St. Augustine*. This volume presents one of the most deeply introspective and brilliant conversion stories of one of the Church's leading intellectual lights who was at one time a great sinner (by his own self-description). His reflections on creation, time, memory, mind, troubling Old Testament passages, and the light of Christ are interwoven into an interesting story of divine guidance. His deep philosophical and theological reflections are less important than his spiritual insights and the Lord's providential guidance of him. As with the autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila, Augustine's love of God springing from the recognition of God's love for him is central to the experience of his work. Reflection on the first few lines of his prayer when the Lord breaks into his almost intransigent heart will make this clear: "Too late have I loved Thee, O Beauty ever, ever new. Too late have I

²⁵ Unfortunately, there are three titles for this work: *St. Teresa of Avila* and *The Life of Teresa of Jesus: The Autobiography of Teresa of Avila* and *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by Herself*. These are all different translations of the same work with different introductions and annotations. Look at the descriptions in Amazon.

loved Thee. For behold Thou wert within, and I without, and there did I seek Thee. I, unlovely, rushed heedlessly among the things of beauty which Thou madest.”²⁶

The third autobiography, *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, relates a story of someone quite different from St. Augustine – a professional soldier and officer (a ladies man accustomed to dueling) was called by God when hit by a “cannon ball” in the leg at the Battle of Pamplona. During his recovery he is given *The Life of Christ* and books about the lives of the saints which opened his heart to renouncing his former way of life and becoming a disciple and priest. He forms the largest religious order in the Catholic Church to this very day. It weaves together his keen awareness of how Christ is moving him with his action packed approach of serving the Lord he loves.

The fourth book is by another Carmelite sister -- St. Thérèse of Lisieux. This autobiography (along with other documents), called *The Story of a Soul*, is the reflections of a sister of true humility, simplicity, and charity who suffered tremendously dying from tuberculosis at the age of 24. As in the above three books, she expresses deep love for the Lord coming from the recognition of His deep love for her. In addition to her good counsels on humility and charity, she presents one of the most profound spiritual treatises on offering suffering to the Lord for souls in most need of his mercy. You may find some parts of this story to be disagreeable because of her joy at the prospect of suffering for the Lord, but I would ask you to keep reading or listening, because it will enhance the love you receive and bring to your prayer. As with the autobiography of St. Teresa, it may take two or more readings to obtain a lasting effect on your prayer.

The fifth autobiography is the Diary of St. Maria Faustina Kowalska entitled, *Divine Mercy in My Soul*. St. Faustina was an early 20th century Polish mystic who was called the Apostle for Divine Mercy, and the initiator of the famous Chaplet of Divine Mercy. Her *Diary* is filled with hope in the unconditional love of Jesus Christ, but also challenges us to move toward greater holiness lest we lose our way toward the heart of God. Like St. Terese of Lisieux, St. Faustina suffered much, died early (at the age of 33), and left a testimony on how to suffer well through faith. It strengthens faith, hope, courage, charity and meaningful suffering.

The sixth autobiography is Fr. Walter J. Ciszek’s, *He Leadeth Me*. In this autobiographical work, he describes his harrowing experience in the Siberian prison camps for 23 years, where prayer gave him the light of Christ to maintain sanity, be a source of hope for fellow prisoners, and to deepen his love for the Lord. The book weaves together lessons on the practice of prayer and reflections on the grace and love of Christ with the life and death story of a Jesuit unjustly accused by the Russian army of being a Vatican spy. This book will help you hear and follow the Lord’s guidance in the toughest of circumstances.

There are several modern spiritual works that deepen and amplify various points on spiritual practice made in the above autobiographies. I recommend four contemporary authors who have helped millions of people to deepen their relationship with the Lord: Romano Guardini, Fulton Sheen, Benedict Groeschel, and Ruth Burrows. We have already introduced

²⁶ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk. 10, 27, 38.

Romano Guardini and Fulton J. Sheen through their lives of Christ. Below are some of their other excellent works along with those of Benedict Groeschel and Ruth Burrows:

- Romano Guardini, *Spiritual Writings*
- Romano Guardini, *The Art of Praying*
- Benedict Groeschel, *Spiritual Passages*
- Benedict Groeschel, *Listening at Prayer*
- Fulton J. Sheen, *Remade For Happiness: Achieving Life's Purpose Through Spiritual Transformation*
- Fulton J. Sheen, *Peace of Soul*
- Fulton J. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay: The Autobiography of Fulton J. Sheen*
- Ruth Burrows, *Essence of Prayer*
- Ruth Burrows, *Before the Living God (Her Autobiography)*

These four authors have published multiple volumes in different areas of the spiritual life. The above nine works are a beginning sample to get started.

There are several classical works of spirituality that are as relevant today as when they were written. Some of the authors were mentioned above. The following works are considered foundational and deeply insightful by many canonized saints:

- St Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*
- St. Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*
- St. John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*
- St. John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*
- Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*
- St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*
- St. Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*

It is not necessary to read a large number of books, but rather to find four or five of them which will inspire a loving and trusting relationship with the Lord, deepen your practice of and insight into prayer, and advance your moral conversion through your relationship with the unconditionally loving God.

VI.

List of Commitments towards Salvation

Commitments to Mass and Reconciliation

- Dear Lord, I will do everything within my power to participate worthily in the Mass every Sunday, and when possible, during some weekdays so that I might stay close to You, be protected from the evil one, and be granted eternal life.

- Dear Lord, I commit to you that I will participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation at least four regular times per year as well as times when I believe I have committed a mortal sin against you, and ask you for your grace for virtue, your protection from the evil one, and your sure assistance on the path to salvation.

Commitments to the Moral Life

- Dear Lord, I will make every effort to make an examination of conscience twice per week so that I might grow strong in virtue and resistance to temptation.
- Dear Lord, I will try my best to pray the three noble intentions quickly, repeatedly, and incisively whenever I am being tempted toward the deadly sins or violation of the commandments.

Commitment to a Life of Prayer

- Dear Lord, I will try to commit myself to 15-minutes of prayer per day so that I might deepen my relationship with you, and open myself to your grace of peace, inspiration, guidance, protection, and transformation.

VII. Conclusion

At the inception of this Workbook, we presented six benefits that make living on Level Four (through the Catholic Church) immeasurably and ultimately worthwhile:

1. Help you stay and grow on the path to eternal salvation.
2. Help you be a person of high integrity, authenticity, and trustworthiness.
3. Help you contribute significantly to your family, friends, community, and Church as well as the Kingdom of God and the culture.
4. Help you benefit from your suffering and help others to benefit from their suffering (see *The Light Shines on in the Darkness*).
5. Help you keep the temptations, deceptions, darkness of evil and the evil spirit in check.
6. Help you build a life and identity filled with ultimate purpose, dignity, and destiny, giving spiritual peace and joy in this lifetime and ultimate happiness and fulfillment with the Lord in the next.

Though the commitments (given above in Section VI) may seem time consuming and difficult, they promise an eternity of joy with the Lord as well as a life in this world filled with ultimate dignity and destiny. They enable the Lord to protect us, guide us, inspire us, and transform us so that we will be prepared to choose and enter the divine kingdom for which we were created. Hence their worth is far far greater than the time commitment and discipline they require. When we sum up the time to go to mass once per week, sacrament of reconciliation four times per year, to examine our consciences twice per week, and to enter into 15-minutes of prayer per day, this “little discipline” requires slightly over three hours per week (90 minutes for mass, 100 minutes for prayer, plus time for reconciliation four times per year).

Of course, as we mature in our spiritual lives, we can increase the time for prayer, commit to daily mass, and make time for spiritual reading. If we do this, we will intensify our relationship with the Lord, strengthen his protection against evil, and increase our momentum on the path to salvation. It will truly be the best investment of time and energy we can possibly make, for it will open the way for God to guide us into his eternal heavenly kingdom.