Let's begin at the beginning.

This is the first week of a 34 week journey. We begin at the beginning - our story. Prayer is about our relationship with God. We will begin to grow in this relationship with God, in the midst of our everyday lives this week, by simply reflecting upon our own story. There may be times we will want to take a period of prayer to reflect upon our story this week. What is most important, however, is that we begin by letting this reflection become the background of our week.

Did you ever get a song in your head and realize that it was there for a long time, no matter what you were doing? This is like that. Throughout our day, each day this week, we will have in mind the memories that have shaped us. (Note especially, the “Getting Started” link at the right for how to do this.)

Let this be the image. This week, let's go through the "photo album" of our life. Let's go back to our earliest memories. Let's let the Lord show us our lives. What "pictures" are there? With each part of my life, what "scenes" do I remember? Who are in those scenes? Some photos will be of happy times, some will be quite sad, others will be difficult to re-collect at all. They all constitute our story and the journey that has brought us to where we begin this retreat.

Take it easy. Go slowly. Take a little bit each day. Being faithful to this exercise will help tremendously to prepare for the weeks ahead. Write down notes or memories or stories, if you like. Feel free to share any grace you discover, using the link to the right. Your sharing might be a gift to someone else.

End each day, before going to bed, with a few interior words of gratitude to the One who has accompanied me through my life, even to this day of presence with me.

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week.

Each week, there will be some practical help to prepare for this week's retreat and for getting the most from it.

- The first and most important point is to begin this journey with great hope and confidence. God is never outdone in generosity. So, if we make even a small change in our weekly pattern, that is a tremendous opening for God to work in us. One way to affirm this hope and confidence is to express it for just a brief instant, each morning, at the same time each day - as I'm finding my slippers, or as I'm brushing my teeth, or while I'm pouring that first cup of coffee - "I know you are with me today, Lord."

- Each of us will have a different amount of time we will be able to give to this retreat each week. We recommend, that if your time is limited, just checking out each of the links on the right hand column of the weekly guide. Then, it is possible
to return each day to read or reflect upon one or another resource provided for the week. In the case of one of the readings or prayers, we might want to print that to read it again later. Making use of all the resources will enhance the retreat experience.

- This week's guide offers us the opportunity to review our life stories through the photo album of our lives. Throughout these weeks, we'll make use of the practice, habit, exercise of letting a reflection or image be part of the background of our day. All of us are aware, from time to time, that there is stuff that occupies the background of our consciousness. The song that plays in our head is a common example. This retreat invites us to practice taking advantage of this facility our brain has. Rather than having that space filled at random with stuff that just comes and goes, we will focus it more consciously. While doing all the ordinary tasks we do in our everyday lives, we will be using that background space to give a distinctive tone to our week. This won't be a distraction to our work, or take any extra time away from our work, but it will eventually make a difference in how we experience our work. It just takes practice.

- Concretely, for this week, we all know the outline of our story. This isn't new material. What is new is that I will consciously be aware that I am reviewing my life story this week. I can plan it fairly deliberately - as an example: Monday and Tuesday, I will be remembering the images of my childhood; Wednesday and Thursday, my teen and early adulthood; Friday and Saturday, the rest of my adult life. So, throughout Wednesday - as I'm finding my slippers, driving to work, walking to my first meeting, walking to the restroom, looking at that image on my monitor, walking to the parking lot, getting supper ready, sharing a memory with a family member, and while undressing before going to bed - during all those brief everyday times, I'll have in the background the formative images that shape my story during my teen years.

- It's about feelings. Each picture in my life story has feeling attached to it. I might look long and hard at that image of myself on the playground in 5th grade. Feelings come to the surface if I let them. Or, that picture of myself in that relationship in my early twenties. We know there are feelings there. There are powerful feelings associated with the birth of a child, the death of a loved one, the change of jobs, terrible family crises, images that come to mind throughout my marriage, battles with people I've struggled with. My feelings will help me see and experience how these pictures tell my story, who I am today.

- It's about God's fidelity. This isn't a sentimental journey. With every picture in my story, there is a grace offered me as I look for God's presence there. If, throughout this week, I imagine God's having been present there with me - even when I didn't notice or feel it at the time - that would be a tremendous grace, unifying my life.

- It's about gratitude. With every memory, every image and feeling, practice saying, "thank you." Even the painful ones. Even if I was not grateful then. Even if it involved some bad stuff I did to myself or others. The Lord was there, loving me. Let gratitude now touch and span throughout the story of my life.

It's about a journey. This is only the beginning. We have 34 weeks. We will move slowly. And, all we need to do is give God just a little space to transform our every day lives, a moment at a time.

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**For the Journey**

Do you know what's good for you? Knowing and then doing what we know is good for us are two distinct things.

I know that jogging is very good for my body and spirit, but going over to the Recreation Center is not only a good idea, but something I don't always want to do.

Taking vitamins is good for us, the medical profession tells us. We are just beginning to believe them, but again we don't all take them all the time. We resist those activities which do not give us immediately the feedback desired. We might begin a diet Monday morning and Tuesday morning we step lightly on the scale hoping to find less of us there. We want results and pretty darn quick!

We begin these weeks of exercising our spirits according to the pattern given by God to us through Ignatius Loyola, accompanied also by this human resistance to what is good for us.
First guide then is this: do not expect, look for or demand progress. Enjoy and live the process, even though as with physical exercise, you might not like doing them every day. As with a diet, you might have to give something up, like time, activity and accomplishments. We allow God to give the increase, the insights, the progress. We begin expecting God to be busy laboring on our part of creation which we have found quite unfinished as a work of art.

This is the first guidepost, don’t stop here; the journey is worth the expense. Go for it!

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In These or Similar Words

Dear Lord,

This seems easy, going back through the ‘photo album’ of my life. Can I really call this prayer? I can go back to my earliest memories, of being a toddler. I wonder what connection this little child has to me?

As I move through my life, into school, learning to read and expanding my world, I can notice things in this ‘album’ that I don’t want to see. They are difficult memories that cause pain and I thought I had put them away permanently. Not everything in my childhood was good. Where were you in that, Lord? Were you with me as I watched the shouting, the arguing?

There were good times, too. Running so freely as a kid, climbing trees, exploring the banks of the creek and sledding down the big hill in winter. There is a freedom to those moments and I sense you in that too.

As I got older, I made choices, Lord. For some of them, I ignored you completely and tried to pretend you didn’t matter in my life. But you stayed with me so faithfully anyway. You guided my headstrong decisions into choices that helped me into a loving life and a good marriage.

Thank you, Lord, for your constant presence in my life, especially today.

Dear Lord,

I feel a little uncomfortable. This kind of prayer is new to me and I’m a little more comfortable using someone else’s words. But I tried it yesterday and it wasn’t hard, it just didn’t always feel like prayer.

I return today and I look at the places where it hurts, the memories where I want to squirm, pull away and try to forget again. It hasn’t always been easy in my life. Were you really with me in all of it? I feel you so strongly now, but I never thought much about you during those times.

How have these difficult times shaped me into what I am today? How has your faithful guidance helped me unseen over the years. Please help me to see your presence in my life and to be guided by it.

Prayer to Begin Each Day:

Lord, I so wish to prepare well for this time. I so want to make all of me ready and attentive and available to you. Please help me clarify and purify my intentions. I have so many contradictory desires. My activity seems to be so full of busyness and running after stuff that doesn’t really seem to matter or last. I know that if I give you my heart
whatever I do will follow my new heart.

May all that I am today,
all that I try to do today,
may all my encounters, reflections,
even the frustrations and failings
all place my life in your hands.

Lord, my life is in your hands.
Please, let this day give you praise.

Scripture Readings:

Psalm 8
Psalm 139