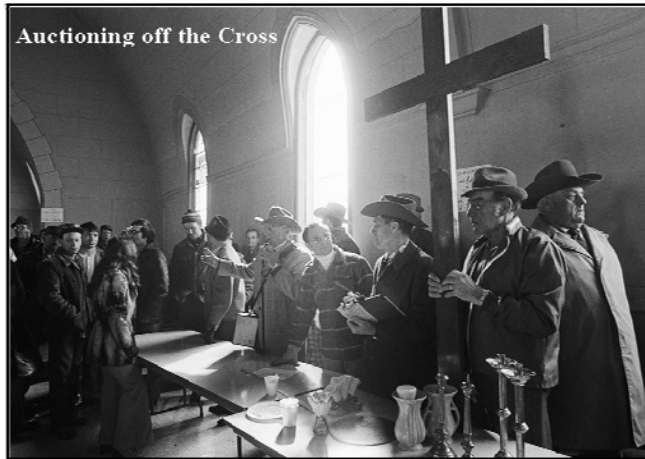


Week 6

The Disorder of Sin — Personal Rebellion

Guide: A Time for Deep Self-Knowledge



After King David had an affair with Bathsheba and had her husband, Uriah, killed, Nathan the prophet came to him with a parable. A rich man, who had many sheep, stole the one sheep his poorer neighbor had. David was filled with outrage at the evil deed of the rich man. Nathan then told David, “You are that rich man!”

Whenever we look at the terrible sin of the world, for which Jesus died on the cross, we must pause and explore that same rebellion from God in our own hearts.

The grace we turn to God for this week is that we might *know* our sin — completely and profoundly — so that we might know the *depth* of God’s love for us personally. We want to know our sin at the level of our feelings.

What have I done? What have I failed to do? Habitually? Almost instinctively? At each stage of my life? When, throughout my life, to this very day, have I acted independently of God? When did I make up my own rules? How have I been dishonest — to others, to myself? When was I cruel or abusive? Lustful and greedy in my desires for power, control, consumption, self-gratification? To what degree have I rationalized and made excuses? How have I let my heart become *cool* to God and to others?

What evil continues because of me? Who remains hurt or damaged because of my selfishness? How have I been deaf to the cry of the poor? By not wanting to get involved or convincing myself that it wasn’t my responsibility? How have I *insulated* myself, lived in my own world, so that I don’t get *bothered* by the needs of others? How does my *comfort* cost others? How have I failed to notice, to care, to investigate, to respond, to get involved, to seek change? Do the poor have me as an *advocate for them*?

This is time for deep self-knowledge with a growing desire to know, as never before, the *depth* of God’s forgiveness and love. This should not be *depressing* but *liberating*. For we will discover that in our own ways we have *auctioned off* the cross and really strayed far from the desires God has for us. But we will end each day discovering that that cross signs a *wondrous love* that frees us from our sin.

This is indeed a week to say “thank you” and to say it with growing feeling. In brief moments, let’s tell our risen Lord, Jesus, how grateful we are, in words, with more intimate affection.

The resources and helps will be very important this week. The readings and prayers are particularly rich. The online version of this retreat has a section called “A Place to Share,” where people can go to share their reflections. Consider sharing your graces there, even anonymously.

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

This is an important week for this retreat. It prepares us for the weeks ahead. We know it isn't an easy week, because it is so against the grain of our culture to examine our hearts before God.

As we begin, there are several important cautionary statements to make. First of all, if you are suffering from clinical depression, please make these exercises only with the guidance of a spiritual director. The whole purpose of this week is to experience *deep gratitude* for the profound depth of God's love and mercy for me. A director will help ensure that the week doesn't get out of focus.

For all of us, it should be noted that the very natural response to an unveiled exploration of our willful sinfulness is genuine *shame*. It is a real grace of this week, but only the *first part* of it. The second part is the surprising realization that I know God more intimately when I am overwhelmed with God's love for me there — *as a sinner*. The two graces go together. If I am determined to avoid the feeling of *shame*, I make it very difficult for God to give me the power of the second grace.

For those of us for whom past experiences of having been *shamed*, in its debilitating or even its abusive senses, has caused great damage to our sense of self, this grace needs to be experienced as *totally different* from that kind of destructive experience. The grace of this week can be very healing to a *shame-based* view of ourselves. For anyone who desires this healing, we strongly recommend proceeding with this retreat, with the assistance of a spiritual director.

That having been said, let's not be afraid to ask God to show us who we are — loved sinners. Let's explore some *methods* that might be helpful for this week.

How we begin is critical. We are asking for graces. That tells us, from the beginning, that we are not going to achieve what we desire on our own here. It will not be the result of *our work* alone. It will be a *gift* — a gift from God. So we begin asking for the grace to be led, guided, shown the way. I might ask God to shine a light on the areas God wants me to see. I might ask God to help me experience the times I have been rebellious, with emotion.

It may appear that doing this week *in the background* of my everyday life is more difficult, but it really isn't. I may want to work to find some times to remember and reflect. I may want to plan to have a lunch alone or to spend some extra time walking somewhere, or to just get up a half an hour earlier — by going to bed a half an hour earlier. The essential nature of this retreat remains the same — it's about unifying my day, from the time I awake to just before I sleep, with a sense of God's presence with me on this journey. It's about consciously focusing on what I'm doing this day, so that more and more of the *background* of my life changes.

Getting concrete is critical. Having a plan is important. For example, I may want to plan to explore the years of my youth early in the week, the middle part of my life during the middle of the week, and my life today at the end of the week. We don't want to have a *vague sense* of it all. We want to explore concrete actions, attitudes, consequences of my decisions, habits that I developed and didn't change, opportunities to love that I passed up, and ways I was deaf to the cry of the poor. Be concrete.

Some of us may be tempted to say that we didn't do a lot of bad things in our lives — we never had an affair or acted dishonestly in our jobs or acted in an unloving way to another person — and that we have always thought of the poor and given generously of our time and money and taught our children to do the same, so we haven't been a sinner. We may need to be more diligent in taking time to examine our heart for any hint of pride or judgment of others or lack of compassion for those who have a more difficult time being good. If we beg God to show us what it is we need to convict ourselves of, our *shame*, God will provide.

For some of us, it will be that really bad single sin or pattern of sin we are so aware of — whenever I think of sin I think of a long-standing habit of abusing alcohol or that affair about which I feel so guilty or a time when I seriously abused another or a person I simply hate or can't forgive. If this becomes the focus of our week, and becomes a way for God to show us love and mercy, it will be a profound grace. However, resist the temptation to stop there, with that single bad sin. Let's unveil our whole lives here. For most of us, the ways we are rebellious in our failures to praise, reverence, and serve God are often quite subtle. We want to know and experience God's love for us, not just because we did this or that. We want to experience love and mercy for who we are — who we have been and who we have become.

Finally, that takes us to Jesus. Let's end each day conversing with Jesus — pouring out our hearts, friend to friend — with growing gratitude.

Consider sharing the graces you received this week, either with someone close to you, or by using the Sharing pages on the online version of the retreat. And let's pray for one another.

For the Journey: The Redeeming Love of God

The dramatic sculpture of the Pietà, which resides inside St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, is safely behind glass now. It was, at one time, more accessible and vulnerable. The beautiful creation was attacked and damaged by a mentally injured fellow. Most of the world's great paintings are guarded and protected in similar manners. Why?

Sin is a part of the same creation that also brings us such beautiful works as paintings, statues, forests, rivers, and other human beings. We pray early and often during the Exercises about God's creative and sustaining relationship of love that God has for each and every creature. Very simply stated, sin is the action that flows from the attitude that my selfish, greedy, and irreverent relationship with any of God's creatures replaces God's own relationship with them. It all goes back to reverence and seeing God in everything and seeing everything in God.

Through my need for efficiency, I might have used a sterling-silver butter knife to pry open a paint can. Sin is not that I broke the knife, but the attitude of disrespect for the limitations of sterling silver that God placed there and gave to us. Sin is also my disregard for the importance to another human being of that piece of silver.

You may check out your behavior against the demands of the Ten Commandments and find that you haven't violated any of those. Sin is more relational than that. More important than the Ten Commandments are the personal covenants that God has made with us through all of creation. Sin is how we violate, ignore, and freely choose to replace God's prior relationship with an object or person with my own self-centered blueprint.

Ignatius offers us his picture of God as always working, laboring to attract and support us. God's mercy is above all other works. Mercy is not only his forgiving of our violations of God's covenants with us, but even more, God intensely desires us to come more and more alive, alert, aware, and sensitive to his presence in his presents. Forgiving us is God's judicial side, continuing our personal creation is his compassionate side.

Jesus did not give up on his friends or on those whom he found to be enemies. He was always speaking, working around, to have them all come to their full senses.

In praying this week in the frightening area of violent and irreverent sin, stay close to the image of Jesus on the cross. He is there to manifest both the evil of sin and the loving response of God to that evil. We can look at anything while standing next to the cross. The grace we seek this week is a gratitude for the ongoing, redeeming love of God that both cancels the debt against us and works that we might have life and have it to the full.

In These or Similar Words . . .

Dear Lord,

I don't want to look! Am I just like King David? I can be filled with outrage at the stories I read about the global issues about dictators, starvation, and the mistreatment of fellow human beings. How can they treat others that way? How can they let sweatshops continue or ethnic cleansing to go on? But now, as I pray, I see my own sinfulness beginning to emerge.

I don't think of myself as a sinner — not a real one. But here I am faced with some of my own shortcomings. I call them shortcomings! Look at me, Lord — I don't even want to admit they are sins! But they are. I see how judgmental I am of people, how quickly I decide whether people are worthy of my approval. I'm ashamed when I see how I have so many prejudices that I mostly try to ignore.

All of these awful things are a part of me. Lord, I almost want to run. How can I face you with such sins? But please, Lord, I beg you. I want to feel your love to the very depths of my being, and I know that first I have to feel your forgiveness. Show me my real self, with all of my flaws. It's not just the way I treat others. I can see it going deeper, Lord. What about the way I ignore others? I pretend I'm far too busy to really get involved with others. I tell myself I can't help it if they are poor or homeless. I have my own family to take care of, my own life to deal with.

Please, heal me. Help me to overcome the way I rebel against you. Heal my heart that resists loving other people and resists loving you. Show me how I choose to ignore you and your teachings. I sin against you and my brothers and sisters. Reveal my selfishness to me, my self-centeredness and self-absorption. Show me how my fears are a way to keep my distance from you.

Stay with me, Lord, and help me. Let me feel your love for me. Let me feel you soften the hardness of my heart. Fill and warm me with your love. Let me carry that love with me and let go of the hardness, the rebellion, the discord, the prejudices. Help me to be as open to others as I am open to your love. Today, tonight, let me embrace the cross that I so often auction off. Let me be helpless before you in gratitude for your wondrous love for me.

Thank you, Lord. Thank you for your endless love and for your bottomless forgiveness.

Scripture Readings

1 John 1:8–2:2

Luke 15

Luke 7:36–50

Luke 18:9–14

Luke 19:1–10

Psalm 51