

Contemplation to Attain the Love of God **[230]**

Note:

Before presenting this exercise it will be good to call attention to two points: The first is that love ought to manifest itself in deeds rather than in words.

- We can think of the words of Saint John (1 Jn 3:18): “My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue, but in deed and in truth.”

[231] The second is that love consists in a mutual sharing of goods, for example, the lover gives and shares with the beloved what he possesses, or something of that which he has or is able to give; and vice versa, the beloved shares with the lover. Hence, if one has knowledge, he shares it with the one who does not possess it; and so also if one has honors, or riches. Thus, one always gives to the other.

Usual Preparation Prayer.

[232] First Prelude: The composition of place: This is the representation of the place, which here is to behold myself standing in the presence of God our Lord and of His angels and saints, who intercede for me. – Again, note the setting. This is the setting of supreme importance.

[233] Second Prelude: The petition: This is to ask for what I desire. Here it will be to ask for an intimate knowledge of the many blessings received, that filled with gratitude for all, I may in all things love and serve the Divine Majesty. – In other words, I ask for knowledge, to obtain gratitude, and thus make a return. Sort of a three step process.

Fr. John Hardon calls the Contemplation for Obtaining Love “the masterpiece of the Spiritual Exercises.” It offers an insight into Christian perfection at once so simple and yet profound as to escape the average retreatant unless he makes an effort to understand its theological implications. Much as the Principle and Foundation anticipates in preview all the subsequent meditations, so the Contemplation epitomizes in retrospect and coordinates everything which precedes. But more significantly, where the Foundation describes the love of God for man in creating him for the Beatific Vision, the Contemplation should elicit a corresponding love for God in self-sanctification and labor for His greater glory.

Viewed in this light, the Contemplation becomes more than just another exercise of the retreat. Its function is to give a practical method for living out the “Contemplation in Action,” which St. Ignatius so effectively promoted in his

asceticism. By whatever name we call it: recollection, the presence of God, purity of intention, prayer in action, union with God—for Ignatius these were almost synonyms for something very specific. He identified them with the habitual practice of supernatural charity, not only during formal prayer or in the silence of the cloister, but in every action of daily life no matter how apparently trivial. What St. Paul urged upon the Corinthians, “Whether you eat or drink, or anything else you do, do all for the glory of God,” Ignatius reduced to a simple form in his Contemplation for Obtaining Love.

Four Aspects of God’s Benefits: In this exercise, Saint Ignatius will have us review God’s benevolence towards man under four aspects, each offering a new insight into the divine goodness and calling forth a corresponding love in me.

(234) First Point

This is to recall to mind the blessings of creation and redemption, and the special favors I have received. I will ponder with great affection how much God our Lord has done for me, and how much He has given me of what He possesses, and finally, how much, as far as He can, the same Lord desires to give Himself to me according to His divine decrees.

Then I will reflect upon myself, and consider, according to all reason and justice, what I ought to offer the Divine Majesty, that is, all I possess and myself with it. Thus, as one would do who is moved by great feeling, I will make this offering of myself:

Take, Lord, and Receive

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and possess. Thou hast given all to me. To Thee, O Lord, I return it. All is Thine, dispose of it wholly according to Thy will. Give me Thy love and Thy grace, for this is sufficient for me.

Let’s digress for a moment: why take and why receive? Why the two words? “Receive’ here means giving to God our entire freedom. Whereas ‘take’ rather means surrendering everything over which we have voluntary control. Why the distinction between offering God our freedom and telling him to take our memory, understanding, and our entire will. The reason is that if we are truly sincere in sacrificing our freedom to God, we are implicitly giving him dominion over the three highest possessions we have: our memory of the past; our understanding of the present, our will, with its desires and hopes and loves for the future. We are dealing here with a unfathomable mystery. It is the mystery of human freedom. We are actually able to return to God everything that He has given us.

What are we telling God? We are saying: 'Whatsoever I have or hold, You have given to me; I give it all back to you and surrender it wholly to be governed by your will.'

And what do I ask from God in return? 'Give me only Your love and your grace, and I am rich enough and ask for nothing more.' This is the climax of the *Suscipe*. We know what Scripture quotes God as saying, 'I love those who love me' (Prv 8:17). God is never outdone in generosity. We move one step towards Him, and He moves a thousand miles towards us.

However, we must leave it entirely up to God how He will reward our generosity towards Him. In the language of Saint Ignatius, all we ask for is that He give us His love and His grace. This bestowal of His love and His grace is certain, depending on our self=sacrifice to Him. But the form that God's love and grace will take is up to Him to decide. We are not bargaining with God as though we expect from Him a salary of consolations for doing His will. No, we are satisfied to believe, on faith, that our sacrifice of self to Him will be infallibly rewarded by His loving grace to us."

At the broadest level, I am told to "recall to mind the blessings of creation and redemption, and the special favors I have received." Significantly, God does not love me with mere affection *ad intra* (within Himself) but effectuates His love *ad extra* (outside Himself), by bringing me out of nothing into existence, raising me to a supernatural destiny, restoring me after I had fallen, and in a thousand ways showering me with His gifts and graces. On my part, this should evoke a responsive desire to give all that I can to God and not remain satisfied with interior sentiments of love. Hence the *Suscipe* is my answer to the *Suscipe* of God. He has exhausted His generosity to me, so I want to exhaust mine towards him praying that prayer.

How much God our Lord has given me of His own Possessions: the Benefits of Creation, the Benefits of Redemption, and Particular Benefits. Let's think of some of those benefits.

The Benefits of Creation.— In the beginning God created for me this beautiful universe, the earth to be my temporary habitation, the plants to feed and clothe me, the animals for my sustenance, assistance, and recreation. Whatever things are of any service to me, constitute so many physical, intellectual, or moral gifts. To realize the value of each Gift, I may suppose its entire absence or sudden privation. Besides, after meditating on what I myself have received, I should also reflect upon what has been granted to so many millions of my fellow men. For we are all bound together by the bonds of a common origin, we form all one mighty family, we are all brothers, both by Nature and much more by Grace. The goods of

each, therefore, are the goods of all; and the goods of all are the goods of each.

Accordingly, every breath I draw, every motion I make, every beating of my heart, every thought of my mind, every aspiration of my will, every moment of my life, is a Gift of God. Every particle of food that nourishes me, every drop of water that refreshes me, every ray of sunshine that warms me, is a Gift of God. Every taste that pleases my palate, every scent that gratifies my sense of smell, every colour that charms my eye, every sound that delights my ear, every truth that enriches my mind, every kindness that captivates my heart, is a Gift of God. And all these innumerable Gifts are entirely gratuitous, being intended for me, not only without any antecedent merit, but even in spite of much subsequent demerit, and lavished on me notwithstanding my baseness, my selfishness, and my sinfulness, by Him Who is infinitely Great, Good, and Holy. But in every Gift I should consider especially with what measureless Love it is bestowed by God; and from this I should strive to realize how earnestly He desires to give me Himself, in so far as I can become capable of receiving Him and is compatible with His Absolute Sovereignty.

The Benefits of Redemption.— Here I should briefly but vividly recall the Incarnation, Life, Passion, and Death of Jesus, my Savior; the Catholic Church and the Sacraments, especially the Blessed Eucharist; Sanctifying Grace, the virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity, the seven Gifts of the Divine Spirit; my soul made a tabernacle of the Eternal Lord, a sanctuary of the most Holy Trinity; the examples of the Saints, the prayers of the Faithful, the intercession of the Blessed, the protection of my Guardian Angel, the solicitude of the Immaculate Virgin, Mother of God and also my Mother. How priceless is every single one of these Supernatural Favors! and how significant a pledge of that everlasting enjoyment of the Sovereign Good which has been promised to all sincere Christians!

Particular Benefits.— Among these I should consider first, my Religious Vocation, the proof of God's mysterious Predilection, bestowed on me in spite of so many sins and infidelities; then, the numerous interior graces, such as lights and inspirations, as well as the abundant exterior helps, such as parents, teachers, advisers, books, sermons, incidents, all gradually and gently preparing me for the Divine Call; further, the still more liberal graces and helps received in this Holy State, ever since I entered the novitiate, particularly the training of an experienced and saintly Master of Novices, the instructions and exhortations of Directors, the counsels and corrections of Superiors, my successive annual Retreats, and these actual Spiritual Exercises.

How can I ever admire sufficiently the goodness of Almighty God showering down such beautiful Benefits, in such ceaseless profusion, on one so utterly

unworthy? And yet, what is incomparably more wonderful than all His Gifts, He longs incessantly, as far as it can be done, to give me Himself. Let me, then, “reflect what I should offer and give to His Divine Majesty; namely, myself together with whatever is mine.” How reasonable it is that I should make the most complete return for so many Gifts, granted so freely and so lovingly, by Him, the infinitely Great God, to me a mere nothing, a sinner; and also how just, since He could not bestow these Benefits upon me for any other purpose than His own Service and Glory! In fact, my human greatness, my royal nobility, my priestly dignity, lies precisely in being privileged to make this return to the Most High.

I must give Him, then, not only all I have, but my very self. This complete donation of myself I have already made by the Sacred Vows of Religion; but it remains for me to confirm it daily more and more by the Perfect Observance of these Vows. My God and my All! He longs to become mine, as far as this is possible to the Creator; and I long to be His, wholly, absolutely, forever. With profound humility, therefore, and with tender affection, I will say after St. Ignatius: “Take, O Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my intellect, and my will; whatever I have and possess. You have given me all these things; to you, O Lord, I restore them; and as they are now doubly yours, I beg you, dispose of them according to your Good Pleasure.”

Yes, O Lord, freely dispose of everything, my time, my talents, my body, my senses, my mind, my will, my health, and my very life. For the future, my only thought, my only care, shall be how to do your most Holy Will, at the merest sign, even in the smallest matter, with all the energy of my being, with the deepest reverence and the greatest eagerness, at the cost of any hardship! And I will begin to carry out my self-immolation without delay, from this very instant. For the Will of God is unmistakably made known to me by the dispositions of His Fatherly Providence, by the example of Christ our Lord, by the supreme law of Fraternal Charity, by the prescriptions of my Rules, the duties of my Status, and the arrangements of my Superiors. But, evidently, it is by practicing Perfect Obedience that I can best substantiate this complete donation of myself to God.

However, I have still something more to give, namely, my Love. One way to enkindle Love is intense Gratitude, prompting man to entire Self-Dedication; the other way is ardent Petition, inclining God to boundless Mercy. I must, then, ask for it with the utmost fervor and confidence in the words of St. Ignatius. “ O Lord, only give me Your Love and Your Grace, for this — namely, to love You in word and deed — this is all I care for, this alone and nothing else will do.” And if now I find that my soul is lovingly intent upon God, I should pause here as long as possible exercising myself in this holy Love.

(235) Second Point

“This is to reflect how God dwells in creatures: in the elements giving them existence, in the plants giving them life, in the animals conferring upon them sensation, in man bestowing understanding. So He dwells in me and gives me being, life, sensation, intelligence; and makes a temple of me, since I am created in the likeness and image of the Divine Majesty.

Then I will reflect upon myself again in the manner stated in the first point, or in some other way that may seem better.

The same should be observed with regard to each of the points given below.”

The second reflection rises to a higher plane, recalling how God not only gives me so many gifts, including myself, but literally dwells in the creatures He donates, “in the elements giving them existence, in the plants giving them life, in the animals conferring on them sensation, in man bestowing understanding. So He dwells in me and gives me being, life, sensation, intelligence, and makes a temple of me.” Again a corresponding desire should be educed in me, not only to give to God all that I have and do, but as far as possible to give myself along with my gifts. There is such a thing as “putting my heart into what I am doing,” intensifying the generosity and fervor of my donation, and so equating in analogous fashion the presence of God in His blessings to me.

Let’s think about what this means: a lover not only gives whatever he has, but also strives to be constantly near the beloved, at least in thought; and God, through the free act of creation, subjected Himself to this law of Love. God is everywhere by His essence, by His presence, and by His power. We can borrow Aquinas’s reply in ST I, q. 8, a. 3, when he says that “God is in all things by His power, inasmuch as all things are subject to His power [just as a king is everywhere in his kingdom, because his power extends to everywhere; his laws affect every place]; He is by His presence in all things, as all things are bare and open to His eyes [He knows what is going on everywhere]; He is in all things by His essence, inasmuch as He is present to all as the cause of their being [He is their cause, and holds them in being].” He is Present in stones and in metals, in liquids and in vapors, in herbs and in trees, in flowers and in fruits, in fishes and in birds, in reptiles and in quadrupeds, in Angels and in Men. His Presence is manifested by their very existence; by their physical qualities; by their life, strength, and sensation; by their learning, affection, and authority; by their supernatural virtues and heavenly graces. Especially, therefore, is He Present to me in my fellow Religious and in my Superiors. But most intimately is He Present to me in my own Heart. In fact, my Body is the Temple of the Trinity, while the Holy Spirit dwells like a most intimate and devoted Friend in my Soul.

This universal and immediate Presence of God means an infinitely loving watchfulness, an ineffably tender solicitude,— Divine Providence,— which extends even to the minutest and most trifling details, or in the words of our Blessed Lord, to the very hairs of my head. I am surrounded by this Loving Presence of God, I am immersed in it, for “in Him we live, and move, and have our being.” We can think of those words of Saint Edith Stein: “What did not lie in my plan lay in God’s plans. And the more often such things happen to me the more lively becomes in me the conviction of my faith that — from God’s point of view — nothing is accidental, that my entire life, even in the most minute details, was pre-designed in the plans of divine providence and is thus for the all-seeing eye of God a perfect coherence of meaning.”

However, God subjected Himself to this law of Love in yet another and, to the human mind, far more striking way. He took the form of a servant; He dwelled on this earth for a number of years; and He not only remains still with me personally Present, both as God and as Man, in the Eucharist, but actually descends into my bosom, by Holy Communion.

I too, then, if I really love God, if I sincerely desire to advance in His love, I too must by all means strive to be ever mindful of Him, to think, speak, and act in His Sacred Presence. I must keep Present to Jesus in the Holy Eucharist, by frequent and diligent Visits from early morning till late at night, and particularly by daily, fervent Communion made with longing preparation and humble thanksgiving. Even while engaged in my usual duties, even while passing through the public streets, my heart must keep conversing with Jesus, my Divine Lover. I must also watch over my Body as His Temple, over my Soul as His Sanctuary, with the greatest care and reverence, by checking every unguarded movement and disorderly emotion, by fleeing in horror from every semblance or approach of sin. Besides, I must be constantly on the alert to see God in all creatures, and all in Him; I must strive to honor Him in my fellow men and in my Religious Companions; but I must especially revere Him in my Superiors, by yielding them Perfect Obedience.

(236) Third Point

This is to consider how God works and labors for me in all creatures upon the face of the earth, that is, He conducts Himself as one who labors. Thus, in the heavens, the elements, the plants, the fruits, the cattle, etc., He gives being, conserves them, confers life and sensation, etc.

Then I will reflect on myself.”

God does more than communicate His gifts, and more than dwell in them. I should further consider “how God works and labors for me in all creatures upon the face of

the earth." As far as it can be said, God "exerts" Himself in giving me the blessings of nature and grace, which He proved conclusively in becoming man for my salvation; and laboring, suffering and dying to show His love for me. Once more, this should produce a similar response in me. In the spirit of the third mode of humility – which now becomes the third mode of love – I should not only be generous towards God in working for His glory, and not only put myself whole-heartedly into what I am doing, but I should work "as one who is laboring," with real exertion and effort and, if need be, at the cost of suffering and pain.

Love is always Active. Just as a lover is ever laboring for the beloved, so God is, as it were, ever laboring for me in all His creatures. Every change, every movement, every development, every growth, is an effect of this Divine Labor. Who causes the dawn to appear on the horizon? Who kindles the myriad stars in the nightly firmament? Who gathers the storm-clouds and sends down the copious rains? Who guides the waters from the mountains to the sea? Who diffuses the light that lends color to every object? Who gives vigor to the seeds of so many tribes of plants? Who makes the blood circulate in such a countless host of animals? It is God Who labors in all these ways for me. And thus He has labored from the beginning of the world, directing His whole activity towards my service, my well-being. With Infinite Wisdom, Power, and Love, He has been arranging everything for my benefit, for my happiness.

God Labors for me, not only directly, in the elements, plants, and animals; but also indirectly through men, my Religious Brethren, my various Superiors, and through the Heavenly Spirits, especially my Angel Guardian and Patron Saints. Their service, their esteem, their affection is all a result of His Labor. And how many creatures day after day combine their exertion,— which is wholly derived from Him and in which He constantly participates,— in order to provide me with food, clothing, shelter, comfort, pleasure, and information!

Besides, what is yet far more astounding, Jesus, true God and true Man, Labored and Suffered for me, from the moment of His Incarnation till His death on the Cross. Even now He Labors for me after a mystic manner in the Blessed Eucharist. Also the Holy Spirit Labors in my mind and will, by continual inspirations and numberless graces, for my sanctification and perfection. In every act of supernatural virtue I perform, this Adorable Spirit Cooperates. Truly, Love and Service are inseparable.

In imitation of this Divine Example and in return for this Divine Service, I too must always Labor by using my senses, my faculties, my talents, for the Glory of God and for the Salvation of His beloved Children. Giving freely what I have freely received, I must strive to become all to all. I must ever Labor for Him by the perfect accomplishment of His Adorable Will. In one word, I must therefore devote all my

energy to the practice of Religious Obedience and the exercise of Fraternal Charity. How, indeed, can we better correspond to this wondrous manifestation of Divine Love, how can we more efficiently Labor for our Heavenly Father than by gladly spending ourselves, conformably to the directions of our Superiors, in spiritual or corporal works of mercy, and by embracing most eagerly those offices which involve the hardest toil or the humblest service?

(237) Fourth Point

“This is to consider all blessings and gifts as descending from above. Thus, my limited power comes from the supreme and infinite power above, and so, too, justice, goodness, mercy, etc., descend from above as the rays of light descend from the sun, and as the waters flow from their fountains, etc.

Then I will reflect on myself, as has been said.”

Finally, at the highest level, St. Ignatius tells me to “consider all blessings and gifts as descending from above. Thus, my limited power comes from the supreme and infinite power above, and so, too, my justice, goodness and mercy, descend from above as rays of light descend from the sun, or as the waters flow from their fountains.” What, we ask, is the real purpose that God has in giving me so many gifts, in which He dwells and continues to labor? To give me Himself. His benefits are all creatures, and intended to lead me to possess the Creator. If I am in His friendship, this possession on earth is enjoyed as “through a mirror in an obscure manner,” but in heaven “face to face.” As the rays of light descending from the sun unite the sun and earth by means of their common light, and as waters flowing from their fountains join the remotest tributary with its primal source, so in the order of grace by means of His gifts God wishes to join Himself to me. The mystery is that even here I am free to make a voluntary response in kind, giving to God what I have, with generosity and sacrifice, while intending these gifts as projections of myself towards an eternal union with God.

God is not only most Loving towards each one of us, as shown by His numberless Gifts, by His intimate Presence, by His unceasing Labor, but, besides, He is infinitely Lovable in Himself. To realize somewhat this Divine Loveliness, we must strive to rise gradually from the creatures to the Creator, observing the beauty of nature in the different realms of the physical universe; the beauty of the Human Soul and of the Angelic Spirit; the beauty of Mary, the Queen of heaven and earth; the beauty of Jesus in His Sacred Humanity enthroned at the right hand of the Eternal Father; lastly, the Ever-Blessed Trinity, Inexhaustible Source of all beauty, infinitely surpassing even the most exalted creatures.

Lastly, combining into one whole these various creations, the Material and the Spiritual, the Natural and the Supernatural, with all their boundless charms, all their fathomless wonders, and gathering these myriad effects of the Divine Omnipotence into one immense universe of inconceivable excellence, and multiplying it a hundred-thousand fold, even so we have nothing but a faint image of the absolutely Infinite Perfection, Power, Goodness, Loveliness of the Triune God. And this Supreme Being for my sake became Man, and on account of my sins died on a Cross. This Adorable Master, having called me to the paradise of Religion, still stays with me in the Blessed Eucharist, continually sacrifices Himself for me in Holy Mass, daily gives Himself to me in Sacramental Communion. By Creative Agency I was formed to His likeness and placed in the condition of a servant. But by Sanctifying Grace I received a true participation in His Immutable Nature, I became a child of God the Father, a brother of God the Son, a friend of God the Holy Spirit. And all this is yet to be completed in a short while, when I shall be actually admitted to the glorious Society of the Saints and Angels, to the very Family of the Ever-Blessed Trinity, to the most intimate Union with the three Divine Persons; when, through the beatific vision, I shall forever be filled with the purest love and peace and happiness. With what confidence, then, and with what energy, I should strive to become more and more perfect after the pattern of my Eternal Father, more and more conformable in my whole conduct to my Adorable Brother, more and more docile and devoted to my Heavenly Spouse!

All of this, everything, is an invitation from God, an invitation to return to Him.

Colloquy: Conclude with a colloquy and the *Our Father*.