

ST. JOSEMARIA INSTITUTE PODCAST

## JESUS, MY CLOSEST FRIEND

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. My Lord my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

With your permission, Lord Jesus Christ, truly present with us in the Blessed Sacrament: The overall theme of these two meditations is on conversion, in light of the fact that we find ourselves in this special time of grace that we call Lent. And we use this time, it's a time of struggle, it's a time of self-denial, a time for extra sacrificial self-giving, but it's especially a time of joy because these are measures to encounter the ultimate satisfaction and meaning of life, which is the very life of Christ.

An anecdote comes to mind. A Jewish writer - now embraced the Catholic faith - I don't know if he's still living, French Jew by the name of André Frossard. And he was walking through the streets of Paris with a Catholic buddy. And in this particular Church, the Blessed Sacrament was exposed in the monstrance. And he asked his friend, André, if he could be excused, so he can make a brief visit to the Church.

Andre was an atheist, atheist Jew. And André said, "Well, why don't I just come in with you? I'll wait." So, they both enter into the Church. André emerged from the truth, from the Church, and said to his friend, "Now I believe." This encounter with Our Lord effected a very profound conversion in André. Not only did he cease being an atheist, obviously didn't cease being Jewish, but he became Christian, became Catholic.

We want to follow the trajectory in the Gospel of this conversion that we want in Lent. What is the goal of this conversion, but to encounter Christ more profoundly, to become like him? It's not, we don't want to focus on isolated action or devotion. We want to focus on the goal. And a key part of our conversion is profound repentance, not guilt trip, but repentance so that we are more apt to connect with Christ, so those barriers between us and Our Lord are removed.

I've said this before, that I am quite consoled by the Gospel characters. Perhaps it's a twisted way of looking at the Gospel characters, but I'm consoled because virtually they're all pretty sinful. So, there's hope left for me. And these sinful men and these sinful women, for the most part, became great saints, and many were martyrs for the faith.

But we notice that conversion never begins with a guilt trip, never even begins with an examination of conscience, that step number one, it's not all the steps, but it's step number one, is an encounter with Our Lord. And we see how the Holy Spirit is illuminating and moving our Holy Father. His big emphasis on attracting people with Christ, encountering Christ, relationship with Christ, prominence given to one's conversation with Christ.

In Our Lord's grand finale that we call the Last Supper, the Last Supper are all about new reflections, new insights on the Kingdom, new mandates on how to follow Jesus closely and it's only reserved for 12, and then 11 men. Judas ran off. And His last words is a meditation, is called the priestly prayer, and then phase three of his life begins after this priestly prayer. Chapter 17 of John. Phase three is his passion and death. Phase one is his infancy.

"When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to Heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come, glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You. Since you have given him power over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom You have given him, and this,' first, this is a first, 'this is eternal life.'" This is happiness. This is real joy. This is eternal life. And on no uncertain terms. It's an absolute statement.

"And this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God." And for the first and only time, he refers to himself in the third person, "that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." That's what eternal life is: to know Jesus Christ. Now, in our prayer, let's unpack that a little bit.

If I read an insightful theology book on Jesus Christ, I'm thinking of a few good ones. One by Frank Sheed, Fulton Sheen, Pope Benedict, will I have eternal life because I will know more about Jesus? I would say that alone, no. And maybe I could give a little bit of an example.

I was hanging out in Northwestern hospital, not as a patient but as a spiritual coach. And all of us here, if someone was going to operate on us, and they said, "Listen, have confidence in me because I've read five books on surgery, on this particular surgery, on taking appendix out. I've read everything there. So, don't worry, let me operate on you." You would say, "No, you're not operating on me because you don't know surgery."

And if you got pushback from this person, "Listen, I've seen videos of appendix being removed, I've read many books, more books than people who actually do the surgery." You would still not let that person under no uncertain terms touch you. Why? Because he doesn't know how, he doesn't know surgery. That's why.

"Yeah, but didn't he read all those books?" Knowledge is a lot more than factual information. What does he mean then by knowledge? The knowledge of the heart, the knowledge of a relationship, the knowledge a man and a woman have of each other when they're courting, that's knowledge. It's not academic knowledge. It's the knowledge between two best friends. It is a knowledge!

And the medium for a relationship is the sharing of knowledge through conversation. That's why the saints were in love with Christ because they conversed with him. Get to know that person doesn't mean to look at the person's CV or bio, "get to know someone" means sit down and have a cup of coffee. Or sit down and have a conversation. That's what getting to know the person is. That doesn't mean, "I need to know more facts about this person." And when you say, "get to know that person," implicitly, you're saying, "get to love that person, have a relationship with that person."

We're going to change that, the generic criticism of our separated brothers and sisters, non-Catholic Christians. And I bumped into this reaction by accident. I'm a little bit on the respecting freedom, but my idea of freedom is not to be totally passive. Not to be a hound dog, either, not to badger people but to nudge people, at least give them the freedom to say yes or no.

So, I do that with people who have some familiarity with the Catholic faith, and attraction, and I will say, "Have you ever considered being Catholic? It's that you sound Catholic in your attitude, in your theological opinions." "Well, no, I'm not there yet. And purgatory and Our Lady and Sacraments and stuff." And this one gentleman said, "But really, I'm reading the Bible, I work in a soup kitchen, I give alms, I tithe, I spend time in prayer. What, why? What's wrong with that? What do you have that I don't have?"

Then I said what you would say: Well, we have - I said, "We have this, on the one hand, there's very little difference. We're trying to follow Christ. The means are quite different." I woke him up a little bit. He said, "Well, what does that mean?" I said, "We have the Holy Eucharist. That's huge. And we believe in it. That's huge." You don't believe in it, you don't have it. I mean, I said it, not like this.

And I said, "We have Confession. Yeah, no, you, of course. You can confess your sins to God. God can do anything he wants. He's not consigned to the Sacraments. One of the perks of being almighty and infinite. And we have the Magisterium of the Church to guide us in the truth. So, the means are a lot more.

Then he said, "Well, why do you think I need those things?" And I said, "Well, to enhance, I mean, you're following Christ, but to enhance your friendship and your personal relationship with Jesus Christ." And he said something that I didn't like. He said, "You're the first Catholic who ever used that phrase, 'personal relationship with Jesus Christ.'" So, pregnant pause.

I said, "Well, whether you've heard it or not, that's the goal of every Catholic, too. "I've never heard it." "Well, now you're hearing it and you should have heard it." What does it mean to converse with Christ? We have him here. We don't see him. We don't, you know, there's a few exceptions like the mystics, like Sr. Faustina who had a more mystical experience of the heart of Christ, which is for public consumption.

Some, not all of them, most not, some of the saints had an occasional vision. Others have even levitated, that'd be kind of fun, you know, but that's certainly not the norm. St. Josemaria, which he hardly dwelled on it, and said, "We got to be very much in the ordinary," his image of Mary smiled at him.

What must I first do? There is another prominent word. So, like me almost telling someone, "Well, I'm going to tell you exactly what to tell your friend" or "I'm going to tell you what to tell your wife" or "I'm going to tell you what to tell your brother or your sister." No, what I can say, and you can tell me, "Deal with them." But I'm not going to tell you what you say, it's too personal.

And Jesus is saying this. He's saying, "Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." Now, you know, and I know that there's certain things we're going to ask for we'll never get. I want to grow an inch by tomorrow. It's not gonna happen. I'll swear by it. I'll put my life on it, it's not gonna happen.

I've prayed for sick people, and a lot of them have gotten better. I want to quit while I'm ahead because I know eventually, it's not going to work, because no one's immortal. So, not everything I ask for, I'll receive. Or my dream is to become, you know, as a side job, a coach. It's not gonna happen. And we come up with all sorts of other interesting examples.

"Knock and it will be opened to you, seek and you will find." Well, we've all had the experience of losing something and seeking it and not finding it. So, what's he saying? We know that this is not absolutely correct. But it is. Jesus is the truth. We have to understand what he's saying. But from a certain angle, this is completely false.

"Ask," you're not going to get what you asked for. You're not going to find what you're seeking for. Just because you knock, doesn't mean someone's gonna open the door. What if no one's home? Okay, how does this whole thing work? I need to look for Christ. That's what I'm asking for. I'm asking for conversion. I'm asking for a relationship with him.

I pray, yes, to ask for favors. There's, no, that's secondary. Purpose of prayer is not to use God as a divine magic wand for favors. I asked a student, he said, "Father, ask me some questions." I'm like, okay, "Well, what's your routine to deal with God?" "Eh," this is college kids, "kind of making it to Mass. It was easier when my parents made me go."

I said, "You praying at all?" "Well, sort of, before a quiz, before a term paper, especially when I procrastinated." "Anything else?" "Yeah, maybe a quickie when I go to bed." I said, "That's it?" He says, "Yeah." No, that's not the purpose of prayer. "Well, I've got this divine connection here who maybe will help me in a clutch."

I was reading this book, couple of books in Spanish. And it was about, it just caught my attention, I saw it in a library in a conference center of Opus Dei, retreat center of Opus Dei, and I was, you know, looking at the bookshelf, and there was a biography of a woman who was getting spiritual direction from St. Josemaria in 1931, 1932 and she died of tuberculosis, both inside and outside, you know.

And then, one of his priest collaborators in this hospital, they were working in this hospital of incurable diseases in Madrid, they were hospital chaplains. And you could almost, in a way that each one had his own personality. Josemaria Escrivá, this other Jose Maria Samoano who died a martyr, he was poisoned by anti-clerical, bad anti-clerical people during, right before the Spanish Civil War. And this woman who died of tuberculosis.

And they all, I guess, it was very much in fashion in those days to keep diaries. All three hand diaries. It was kind of nice. So, I read a biography of this woman, Maria Ignacia. And then the priest, Fr. Jose Maria Samoano. They're very interesting, but their diaries are very similar. They're very, they're, they have a drive inside themselves to encounter Christ, to deal with Christ, to suffer for Christ, to love others for Christ.

And that Protestant buddy of mine would not have said what he said to me if he had read those two books. He would have not said that this is something out of the ordinary, something that he did not expect. He had this relationship with Our Lord, it was not formalistic. It wasn't mere observance. It was a relationship with the Lord. And so, the first disposition I need for conversion is this desire to seek Christ.

St. Josemaria says this, "I have distinguished, as it were, four stages in our effort to identify ourselves with Christ. Seeking Him, finding him, getting to know him, loving him. It may seem clear to you that you are only at the first stage. Seek him then hungrily." It's an important word, "hungrily." Not lackluster, not getting a quickie in.

"If you act with determination," which is a word St. Teresa of Avila would use, "If you act with determination, I am ready to guarantee that you've already found him, and have begun to get to know him, and to love him, and to hold your conversation in Heaven. I beg Our Lord to help us make up our minds to nourish in our souls the one noble ambition that matters, the only one that really is worthwhile: get close to Jesus."

Maybe for the next meditation, but there's a pattern, there's a trajectory. Jesus looked at St. Paul for him to stop his terrorist activities against Christianity. Peter looked at, Jesus looked at Peter so Peter wouldn't despair over the worst possible sin a future pope could commit and that is to deny Christ publicly three times. And then the cherry on the cake is to cut someone's ear off.

Jesus looked at the Samaritan woman. Jesus looked at the converted, she would be a converted prostitute and the first evangelizer of the Resurrection, named Mary Magdalene. It's always an

encounter with him first. It's not an ethical analysis of their wrongdoing. We close our meditation going to the Blessed Mother.

It's interesting to note in the gospel of St. Luke: Luke, it's implied, interviewed Mary. That's where he came up with the five Joyful Mysteries. Luke in two occasions of the gospel describes Mary as contemplating the events of her Son's life. Mary, pray for us, so that we give this a priority: My quiet time, five minutes, ten minutes, half-hour, whatever, to spend with your Son so that I get to know him and I could reflect His light to my family and to my colleagues.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations you've communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help in putting them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.



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