

ST. JOSEMARIA INSTITUTE PODCAST

THE FOUR STEPS OF MORTIFICATION TO CONTEMPLATE CHRIST

REV. ERIC NICOLAI

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. My Lord and 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.

We think now, in our mind's eye, of the moment in which Jesus was led out by the Spirit into the desert. It's always the way we begin Lent. But we can ask, "Why did Jesus need to go out into the desert?" We know that everything he does has specific meaning and purpose. Indeed, every one of his actions, even the most smallest actions, even the most inconsequential actions, were redemptive.

Whether it was the suffering, the flagellation, the crowning of thorns; whether it was the great miracles, his words in front of the crowds, His work of 30 years of silence with St. Joseph, the moments when he spoke with his mother, his gestures, his sleep, his eating, everything was redemptive. So, why did he go out like that, into the desert? In fact, it said, "the Holy Spirit led him out there into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." And he was tested there for 40 days. He fasted for 40 days and 40 nights, and he was hungry.

Well, any person hearing that at that time would have understood immediately the significance of 40 days. The immediate connections with the 40 years of the people of Israel in the desert, they understood the 40 days of the flood, you know that it rained for 40 days, the 40 years of the pilgrimage, 40 days of, of Moses on Mount Sinai, and so many other references. They would have understood the 40 days in the desert, or that 40 days, but why the desert?

Well, the desert is a place that doesn't offer you anything. There's no vegetation. There's no shade. It's cold at night and hot during the day. There's no life, there's no water, no food. It just doesn't offer you anything; like it's not a place to go on vacation. I mean, yet, he goes there to pray. There's nothing there. There's no special drink, there's no fountain. And by going out to pray like that he really manifests his complete dependence on God the Father. God the Father is with him. God the Son is totally dependent on God the Father.

He has nothing to eat. He has no packaged lunch, no snacks, nothing to drink. All he could do was pray. And well, there's a common question being asked these days during Lent. "What are you offering up for Lent?" people ask. Some people say "chocolate" and things like that. And it's true that when they talk about Lent, very often people just exclusively identify Lent with sacrifice or just some kind of prayer to purify ourselves.

And that, well, that's true, but it's only partly true. I mean, the Lord goes to the desert so that we can seek to imitate him. But we can only really imitate him if we understand why he's there. I mean, we can't convert water into wine. We don't have that power. We can't walk on water. But yes, we can have the same Spirit that He had, the spirit that led him to the desert. Because he has to live in us. Christ has to live in me and you and ultimately, for us, the meaning of mortification and penance and fasting is that it's a way for us to identify ourselves with Our Lord Jesus Christ. And you know, he went there to pray and to show his dependence on the Father.

So, the first thing we want to do during Lent is to pray and show some way of depending really on the Father. And, of course, immediately after those 40 days, the Lord threw himself into the ministry. He formed his disciples. Of course, he wasn't trying to reach such an extreme level of purity and heightened sanctity, that he would somehow be untouchable. I mean, you'll notice how, after those 40 days, the devil just leaves, but he's going to come back later. He just leaves. "Okay, I did, I'm gone."

So that means what? It means that Jesus did not overcome the devil. He did not overcome evil by his fast. He conquered it, but in another way. He did not totally overcome evil in the world. After all, when he entered into the ministry, he didn't heal everybody, a lot of still people limping around and with problems. He would heal some people, but they would maybe later on also become sick, they would not be permanently healed of stuff. He raised Lazarus, but later on, Lazarus died. He was killed, in fact, by the Pharisees. Other people that he raised from the dead, they eventually died.

He forgave sinners like the paralytic, but that guy probably sinned after. So, he does not completely do away with evil, it still is present in the world. But you could say that he lives with it, he kind of redeems it. And its very presence is there. But it gives a new dimension to our fallen nature. And for us to, especially during Lent, Jesus must appear, and he must be seen, even with our fallen nature. So, during Lent, we have these practices of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. They're there so as to detach ourselves from our desires, from making ourselves the center of the universe.

And it would be like a way of preparing the way so that Christ can really live in us. And it means that we really have to understand the meaning of mortification. And let's not just force ourselves into doing these mortifications during Lent, or these things we're denying ourselves. Let's understand it, but positively. I mean, if we live Lent, it's because we understand it. I heard a guy say, "Hi, Father, I'm really enjoying Lent!" "Oh, yeah, you're really enjoying Lent?"

So, I didn't know if he was like not understanding it, or maybe he really, really understood it. And, well, let's see if we can really quote, "enjoy Lent," meaning we really understood its positive meaning. Lent is not for stoics. Mortification is not sort of so that we avoid bad feelings or that we become people that are absolutely, you know, insensible to pain, or have developed a military discipline that we're inured to any discomfort like those soldiers that manage to sleep in a muddy pit without water and in the rain and in sweat; well, they've been

trained to do that. That's what soldiers are supposed to do. Well, we're soldiers, I guess, as well, but we have to understand our enemy.

And mortification has a deeper meaning that maybe we have not always grasped. And the meaning is that it allows Christ to live in us. Kind of like to give him that space so that, you could say, he can redeem evil in our world, in our life. And I read this recently, that mortification can be understood like four steps in a staircase that leads us to be identified with Christ.

As we go up those stairs, we can't skip any of the stairs, because at the top, Christ awaits us with love, so that we can really say what St. Paul said in his famous passage, that almost emblematic passage in his letter to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ." I have been crucified. "It's no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." That's a very powerful and emblematic statement and it's somewhere because he went up those stairs. And what are those stairs that we must go up? In order to reach Christ and identify ourselves with him, so he can really live in us?

Well, the first step is, in this staircase, the most superficial one, sort of the lowest step. In that sense, I guess you could say the easiest one. And that's corporate mortification. It's actually, like, we hear "corporal" and we think, "Oh, my God, this is painful. But it's actually just the first step, the first level of knowledge that we acquire about anything is always the external one, which enters by our senses. When we hear something, we see something, we taste something, we touch something, it's like, the first level of purification.

And we have that emblematic phrase of our Father from *The Way* who says that "One has to give the body a little less than it asks. Otherwise, it turns traitor." Or a little less than it's due, so we have to give the body a little less. I don't think you have to be a Christian, I don't think you have to be a person with much supernatural or spiritual sense to understand how true this is. I mean you could put this in a gym, right?

You could put this into a training facility because everybody understands that we have to face our body, we have to master it in some way in order for us to become truly free. And those people give themselves over to food, without any restraint, or to drink, with any sobriety, no sobriety whatsoever, or stay in bed as long as they want because their body is saying, "I need to sleep a little bit more, I need to sleep." Any person who gives his body all that it craves, all that it asks for, well, these are people that are guided by caprice.

When whims play such a huge role in their life, obviously their will ends up quite weak! There's a difference between a whim and a will. And there are people who say that they only do what they want like they kind of have this pretense of being free: "I do what I want, at every moment. Any moment, I just do what I want, that's how I want to live." But of course, it's not really that they're doing what they want. They're doing what they feel like doing. And there's a difference between wanting and feeling. And they end up inevitably being slaves to their body.

Isn't it curious? Because this attitude is kind of disguised as a form of exercising freedom, that, that capacity we have for freedom to eat, what we want, to drink whatever we want, to go up and get up whenever we feel like it. It may seem like they're free. But by doing all these things, their freedom actually gets smaller, smaller, smaller, weaker, weaker, and more fragile. Soon as they give in to, apparently freely, to everything. It's like a contradiction. But those persons are, those persons that are able to give up their body and give a little bit less than what it asks of it, they end up having mastery over themselves.

And they're in a position, a kind of readiness to move on to the next step. They're freer, so they can go to the next step in mortification, in our identification with Christ. And the next step is the care of little things. That's the next step in the staircase. So, we often hear about little things. But we have to understand the point of why we have to take care of little things. And the point of taking care of little things is that we might acquire a spirit. We can have a list of little things that we're working on, that we're trying to be improved in.

But the purpose of that list is to acquire a spirit, a spirit that is of a disposition to always give of ourselves, to enter into relations and good relationships with others. Otherwise, that list could just be, you know, a form of perfectionism, a kind of expression of our own obsessiveness. Unless we have a proper vision of the real purpose of the little things, we could end up with all these maniacal obsessions. And isn't it curious that having a person with obsessions, they have to see things done this way, and that way, exactly like that, we put things like this way, they end up being people that are very difficult to live with. Like they're annoying! And yet, the spirit of little things is to be a pleasant person to live with. That's the spirit of little things.

So, what is the spirit of little things? It's to get out of ourselves so that we can reach out to others. And Francisca Javiera del Valle wrote in her diary a whole list of all the things that she liked, that she enjoyed. Certain foods that she liked, even things that she liked to look at like she had an image of Our Lady, she liked to look at it. All really nice things. And she started to let go of all those things. She took these things away. And she did that so that she could see others better. Because if she was only looking at things that she liked, she would somehow lose sight of the others.

And that was a way for her to cease being at the center of her thoughts, at the center of her desire, at the center of her actions, and start doing things in such a way she could get out of herself. And that's what we have to do too, we have to get out of ourselves to reach out and find the great dignity of others. That's the spirit of little things. And it's amazing when you live with somebody who takes care of little things and has the spirit of little things, it's a great joy, and it's a great pleasure to live with that person. Because they're concerned about caring for others.

It's a person that goes out and is not kind of sheltered in their own little world. So maybe we can see: the little things I'm living, are they really making life more pleasant for others? That's the second step. First step corporal mortification, second step is care of little things and the spirit of

little things. The third step is interior mortification. It's that area that purifies us from all that has to do with our honor, with our good reputation, with our attachment to what others might think about us, we want them to think well of us and stuff. And there too, we learn a lot from a humble person who does not look at ourselves, not turned inward.

And like if we said that care of little things has as an objective, to get out of oneself, to go out to serve others, perhaps interior mortification is more kind of look, it looks inside. Not because we're wanting to find ourselves or look for ourselves, but rather so we could find God inside, discover God there. You know, St. Augustine wrote that emblematic phrase that was based on his own experience: "The Lord is closer to us than we are to ourselves." *Interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*. He's closer to us than we are to ourselves.

So, interior mortification, since it purifies as well, things that have to do with honor, with, you know, whether people like me or not, with my, my esteem in others, if we're purified of all those things, our pride, our vanity, suddenly, we can find God. And St. Augustine recounts how he'd been searching far and wide for God and he didn't realize that the whole time he was, "You were within me. You shouted, you screamed, and I did not hear," he says.

The whole time, God was deeply within him, and he was being blocked by his own insatiable desires to just seek himself. So, what happens? Interior mortification allows us to pray wherever we might be. If we're free like that, we can pray while we're working, while we're preparing a meal, while we're in the grocery store, in the car, in the subway, doing sports, because God is there. And the interior mortification allows us to find him.

Imagine if we were so detached from ourselves that we could just easily be in the presence of God and talk to him. Because when you're emptied of yourself, you find him. But if you're full of yourself, you end up just thinking of your loneliness, thinking of what somebody said, the tone with which they said it. What happened here or there, did they, did I say the right thing, or what did they mean by that? But the person who is emptied of all that, they can always find God within themselves. They're like, always on the right frequency. And even God Himself ends up conquering our own intimacy.

We develop this interior silence, we end up not turning around on ourselves, otherwise we would end up always having like interior judgments, critical spirit against others, lacks of charity in our judgments to others, that's all lack of mortification, interior mortification. Even, you think, the capacity for wonder. That's an interior thing. And it somehow stems from interior mortification. So, we got corporal mortification, first step. Second step is the care of little things. Third step is this interior mortification.

What's the fourth step? Well, the fourth step is the most difficult step to take. We call it passive mortification. It's the most complicated one to conquer. If the first three, you could say, require kind of an active disposition of the will, here, with passive mortification, it's something that

we receive, it's something we kind of suffer. It's not chosen. It comes to us as God seeking us out. It comes to us without reservation, no expectation, no RSVP, you know, it just, God comes seeking us out. And therefore, it's often more difficult to accept because passive mortifications, no matter who you are, they always come. They're always knocking at our door.

And it can be difficult, especially if somebody has not walked up those first steps: corporal mortification, interior mortification, and care for little things because it requires some level of interior freedom. It can be very hard to accept those passive mortifications that come our way. And a person who doesn't accept those passive mortifications, those things that they suffer, they can reject them.

And a person can end up even rebelling against God, or not seeing God and saying, "You're gonna give me this? Forget it! I'm not accepting that." Whether it's an illness, whether it's a humiliation, a form of suffering. Why? Because that person does not understand that it is God who is sending this, and that person simply refuses to understand that he would dare to send us this.

I was struck, reading this point of *The Way* I've read many times, but you know, seen in this light, it's quite striking. Our Father says in *The Way*, 194, "I will tell you which are man's treasures on Earth so that you will appreciate them. Hunger, thirst, heat, cold, pain, dishonor, poverty, loneliness, betrayal, slander, prison. He says it so we appreciate them. In fact, in Spanish, he says it slightly different, he says, *para que no los desperdicies*. You know, that is, *desperdicies*, "so that you don't waste them."

Like, don't waste the hunger, don't waste the thirst, don't waste the heat. And if we were to look over every one of these things, each one slowly, each word, you know hunger, thirst, heat, well, we realize that nobody's really prepared to suffer hunger. Nobody's prepared to suffer dishonor or loneliness. Who's prepared for that? All these things: betrayal, slander, prison. These are not just for certain people who have, you know, gone to university for these things, right? "Yeah, I've got my Ph.D. in betrayal. I learned that." Nobody, nobody is ready for this.

Yet, these are all things that the Lord himself suffered. He suffered them obviously in his Passion, but also during the three years of his public life. He suffered those. Why? Why did he suffer those? Well, I mean, the simple answer is because we live in a world that is under the law of sin. It's not a perfect world, these things happen. Evil will happen in all forms. And many of them are just absolutely unjust.

And we are different, the Christians are different, because we can appreciate them in such a way that, that we can allow Jesus to appear. And as he suffered them, we can actually live them with joy, even though we're not prepared, and we can live them with joy, because Christ came to redeem us with these things. And there are many Christians who have suffered these things. You think, you know, people being brought to prison, you think of Cardinal Văn Thuận in Vietnam, who suffered who knows how many years in prison.

Or Cardinal Pell, unjustly accused in Australia. And so many more. Or somebody who suffers the death of a loved one or, or the drama of an accident, they suffer a grave injustice, like just being robbed, or is on the street or something, or a calumny. We have to pray about this today, how we suffer this passive mortification.

I finish with an anecdote that I heard from a Spanish priest who had been recently ordained, and he was stopped at a gas station and the gas station attendant came up to him, saw that he was a priest, and he said, "Father, Father, you know, look, I have had a lot of problems. I was in a traffic accident a few years ago. And this left me completely incapable of moving like I was invalid for quite a long time, and that, that inability led me therefore not to be able to work, I couldn't work, and the result of not being able to work, after that I got into a deep depression.

"And since I was in a deep depression for a long time, my marriage failed, and my wife abandoned me. And, you know, now here I am, I've got this job, and what must I do?" And so, the priest, you know, phew, "What am I going to say to this guy, you know, he was recently ordained and, and he said, the Spirit, boom, he saw that the guy was wearing a cross. And he said, well, you're wearing a cross there around your neck there. And what is the symbol of the Christian? And the priest, the guy goes, "Well, the cross." "Well, maybe now is your opportunity to embrace that cross and see how you can really be a Christian, really be a Christian, embracing all these things.

"I don't think you've lost your faith. But I think Jesus now can give you meaning to all those things that have happened just by the little cross that is hanging from your neck." And we too have to do that. I mean, you think, first Christians, what was the symbol for first Christians? It wasn't the cross. I mean, no way. It was not the cross. Maybe the Good Shepherd. You know, "I'm the Good Shepherd."

So, they saw images of the Good Shepherd. So that was there. That was the symbol on the top of their churches, you know, the Good Shepherd. Or the fish because it represented Christ in Greek, the way it was written. So, cross was a shameful death for them. More than a stigma, it was revolting! It was really difficult to accept that God should have died in this way, in such a shameful way. And that's what happens, really, in passive mortification.

The cross happens, suffering happens, humiliation, we can't do much about it. What are we gonna do? Can't just wipe it off, delete it. There's no solution except to accept it, embrace it, and love it. But that's not easy. It's not an easy thing to do. So, we think of that, why it's saying, I don't know who said it, but he said that "Jesus is a strange lover. He loves those who crucify him, and he crucifies those that love him."

So, during Lent, let us be loved by Jesus, right? And if we really want Christ to reign in us, we have to accept our own weaknesses, seek to purify ourselves of these weaknesses, of these limitations, really living so that Christ really lives in us, and that purification requires penance, sacrifice, mortification, and there's no better example than our Blessed Mother at the foot of the

Cross. She stood there and she sort of carried the Cross together with Jesus as she stood there. Let's go up those four steps. And as we go up those four steps we'll become closer to Him and He will truly live in us.

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



ST. JOSEMARIA INSTITUTE

WWW.STJOSEMARIA.ORG

Content may not be published or reprinted without permission.

We are pleased to offer a transcript of this podcast to serve the needs of all our subscribers. Please note, however, that this transcript is generated by AI and may not be perfectly accurate.

➤ SUBSCRIBE TO OUR NEWSLETTER