

ST. JOSEMARIA INSTITUTE PODCAST

THE PURPOSE OF LENT: GET CLOSER TO JESUS

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of 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.

With your permission, Lord Jesus Christ, truly present with us in the Blessed Sacrament. And as Lent is well off to the ground, off from the ground, we ask You, Lord, that this time of special graces be for us individually an occasion of profound conversion, that little by little, we become more united to Christ, that we get to know him as an individual gets to know a friend. He's our divine friend. He's many things. As God, he's our Creator, as man, He's our Savior.

And Jesus, in His humanity, translates the infinite transcendent love of the Father in human form, he becomes a human language of God's infinite transcendence. That's why he's called Word Made Flesh. That's why the letter of the Hebrews say that God spoke through his patriarchs and his prophets. And in the fullness of time, speaks to us through his own very Son. He reveals Himself through His Son.

And the humanity of Jesus, what does it reveal? How much God loves us and how much Christ because He's God and man, He wants our love. He needs our love. And his love culminates in his Passion on the Cross. I've asked some young kids, "How's your Lent going?" And they've all said, "Very well." I said, "Why do you say your Lent is going very well?" "Because I have not bitten my nails for eight days. At first it was hard, but now it's getting a little easier."

The other young little girl gave up gum. "My Lent is going well; I gave up gum." And I said, "Well, what else are you doing for Lent?" "That's real hard for me. What else do you want me to do?" Well, I said in a very nice way, "Well, the last time I checked, the purpose of Lent is to get closer to Jesus. And I don't know if giving up gum is going to do the trick, at least it's not included in the Gospel."

So, what must I do? There's these three traditional devotions that were lived by the Holy Church, by the early Church. And it's in the Gospel as well. The Gospel, Ash Wednesday: Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. And the early Church interprets that as conversation with Christ, that's prayer, obviously; fasting, that extends itself to putting our own pride and our habits that veer us away from focus on Christ.

They probably would have said the internet or social media, but that was about 14, 16 centuries ago, 17 centuries ago when the fathers would write about what to do for Lent. But fasting, and then they reveal, one of them reveals that the glue holding the whole thing together is deeds of kindness. And we're going to focus on prayer. The, you know, in a certain sense, the first devotion.

What is the medium to become friends? It's conversation. I know a few people, not a lot of people, but a few people who have been on the verge of proposing to a young lady on the other side of the world by, just as a consequence of text exchanges and email exchanges, don't recommend it. But as they say, out there, "it is what it is." And luckily, some common sense got the better part. And she got a tourist visa and moved to the same city as the young man who wanted to propose. And he realized that this was the thing to do because he needed to verbally speak to this person, and spend time with this person, and the contents of the conversation, though at times could get deep and personal, is secondary to the actual conversation.

You need to spend time with someone. You need to speak with someone, you need to hear someone: what goes on inside that person, and you need to reveal what goes on inside of you to generate a bond of friendship. Isn't really that the case, that we become friends when we spend time with one another, and we exchange words? We may forget the conversation, but the fact that we are exchanging words that reveal ourselves creates a bond. And hence, long-distance relationships are fine as long as eventually, that relationship is no longer distant, for the very fact that the human person needs close communication.

What do we mean by prayer? And it's okay. We may say, "Well, I'm, I'm gonna say the Rosary. Can't recommend that enough. Night prayers, morning prayers. But that's not what Our Lord revealed explicitly. And many times our separated brothers and sisters who are Christians, non-Catholic Christians have that right. They have a personal relationship with Christ which means they use Scripture, the words of Jesus, His sentiments, His actions, as the medium to hear Him and to speak to Him. This is not a non-Catholic devotion This is a Catholic devotion.

The purpose of the Gospel is to have a conversation with Christ. He wants us to have a conversation in a certain way. Am I implying that we should exempt ourselves from reciting the Our Father and the Hail Mary and the Glory Be? No. But even that prayer should not be mere recitation, should be true contemplation that those words mean something and that those words come from the heart.

But Our Lord wants us to insert ourselves into the scenes of the Gospel. He wants us to listen to what he says it's eternal. That's the miracle of the Gospel, that there is a personal message for me in the Gospel. And in fact, Lent begins with an exchange between the evil one and Our Lord. Lent begins with a commemoration of Our Lord's Prayer, a prolonged prayer, the Gospel says 40 days, I don't know if it's literally 40 days, I doubt it. But 40 is a spiritual number, a long time.

Could have been 40 days, I have no problem with it. But I think it's more symbolic of a long period of time. And so, Jesus begins his public ministry lost in prayer, spending that sojourn in the silence of the desert. I was privileged and blessed to have been able to spend almost a week in the Holy Land. And you contemplate the Gospel in a little different, in a different way, because you see what Jesus saw. A lot of these, the landscape, for the most part, has not changed unless they build towns and cities on, on that landscape.

And there is a desert, I mean, it's not what we'd imagine, you know, a desert with pure sand. But there's desert, there's extended areas of land that has no houses and it's windy, and it's stark, you could see that, and he would hang out there. That's where he would spend those 40 days and 40 nights. There's many hills where Jesus would go and sojourn for the night to pray. And so that has a very strong impact, to see exactly what Our Lord saw, and what was involved with his own prayer and his own interior life.

And as He leaves the desert and is about to embark upon his public life, he is confronted by the evil one. And the evil one tells him to take a shortcut: "If you're really the Son of God, relieve that hunger, dull those hunger pains and turn those stones into bread. And Jesus reacts, not to teach the evil one, but to teach us. These are virtually His very first words. His virtual first words is that I need to meditate on Scripture. I need to do that. And we may be daunted by that.

Maybe we are afraid we would draw a blank. We don't know what to do. It feels like a waste of time. This is what he says, this is what Jesus says: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread. But he answered, it is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" I think another Gospel says that "man does not live on bread alone but on the Word of God."

Now "Word of God" signifies Christ himself. He's called the Word. It's the first word or the first message of John's Gospel addressed to Christians: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And the Word became flesh. Jesus is called Word, Jesus is called communication between God the Father and us. I can't strive to get close to Christ unless I speak to Him as a friend.

And we look at the Gospel as an overview. And again, going to the Holy Land, the Holy Land in itself drives home the fact that Jesus dealt with a lot of friends: Mary Magdalene, at Peter's house he lived there, Cana where he partied at a wedding, different parts of Capharnaum, from the shores of Lake Gennesaret, where he called these fishermen to become Apostles, even on Calvary in Jerusalem. Even there, he made a new friend, Dismas. Bethany, where he had his friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, et cetera.

And in a way, it's more than that. But in a way, the Gospel is a compilation of conversations Jesus had with his friends. And these conversations are very interesting because virtually all of them have led to conversion. We see in the Gospel that conversations lead to conversion. They see Our

Lord, they contemplate him, they talk to him, and they repent. How's your prayer? Do you have time to spend 15 minutes with Christ every day? Do you really want to be a saint? I ask myself that question. "Yeah, I really want to be a saint. I want to be united to Christ; I want to get to know Him."

Well, do you know the Gospel? Do you read the Gospel? Do you meditate on the Gospel? Do you know the Gospel as well as our separated brothers and sisters? "Well, that's, that's a Protestant custom." No, it's not. Jesus is at the center stage of my faith. Are you generous enough to carve out some time to speak with him? Well, how are you going to be a saint if you don't talk to Him, if you don't know Him, right? And he continues that message in his Eucharistic discourse again. He's talking about how He is our food. He's our, the Bread of Life.

And Jesus speaks to us from the monstrance here in the Tabernacle. And we put words in his Eucharistic mouth. What are the words in his Eucharistic mouth? The words of the Gospel. And the Gospel, yes, forms the core of the teachings of the Church. But the Gospel speaks to me very personally. And I ask the Holy Spirit to help me download that Gospel, so I hear what you have to tell me, Lord.

And what does the Lord say in his Eucharistic discourse? He says the following: "It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." So, Our Lord gives another revelation here. These are not just words that I would read from a novel or even a theology book. These are words that are chock full of grace and nourishment. I may draw a blank. Many of the saints have drawn a blank.

St. Josemaria, maybe that's what he means. Maybe he drew a blank. He says that very few times in his mental prayer, in his contemplation, he didn't have to go against the grain, uphill. And Saint Mother Teresa, her prayer was so tough, that on a human level, she had faith, but her faith had to overarch what she felt, what she experienced. And she felt that you know, she wasn't getting anywhere with her prayer. But she was faithful to it.

And we know, maybe she didn't know. But we know that her prayer had a profound effect. Maybe we could get more down to Earth because we admire the saints, but some of them you know, we can't identify. But I think this recent saint who's a member of Opus Dei, Blessed Guadalupe, each person's different, and no need to feel guilty because we don't experience what she experienced.

She was a chemistry teacher; she did domestic work. A regular woman, ordinary, probably won't make an exciting movie because she was so ordinary. Well, nor did the private life of Jesus; that wouldn't make an exciting movie either. Because all he did was go to work and come home and hang out with his friends and his family. And she got in a little bit of trouble because there is, I guess, a phone near the chapel in the center of Opus Dei in Madrid, Spain.

The phone was ringing, in those days you answered the phone, and she, the phone was ringing and she didn't answer the phone and she was doing her prayer and someone walked in the door, heard the phone ringing and you know, got the phone and answered the phone and then popped into the chapel and in the Spanish fashion reprimanded Guadalupe: "Why don't you answer the phone? It's only five feet away from you."

And she said, whatever the woman's name was, Maria, "I did not hear the phone." She said, "Well, the phone was ringing, by the way." "Well, I really didn't hear the phone." "Why didn't you hear the phone?" "Because I was so immersed in my prayer." I don't know how, if it went over big with the reprimandor, but the narratives tell us that she would really look forward to it and throw herself into it.

And what does Our Lord say? We heard in today's Gospel that the measure you give will be the measure you receive. And so, yes, the grace of God. Without the grace of God, we don't progress. But at the same time, Our Lord works with my freedom. And maybe he's asking me and asking you, "Do you really want to be a saint? Are you really serious about being a contemplative? Well, start struggling to pray. Show up. Seek Me." And don't come up with excuses that you don't have time. Make the time. You know, turn the train ride, turn the train seat into a little mini chapel or the car, whatever it takes to spend that time because that's what He tells us.

St. Josemaria tells us, and that's what kind of made him a famous preacher because at that time there was less emphasis on meditating on the Gospel and dialoguing with Our Lord in the scenes of the gospel because that's what the Rosary is. Those scenes are not just historic events. The protagonist is God. So, they're eternal. And St. Joemaria said that we need to reconstruct all the scenes of the Gospel and immerse ourselves in those scenes. Because, number one, we are a little bit or maybe a lot of bit of every single Gospel character.

And you may say, "Well, listen, I resent that. I'm not Judas, give me a break, okay?" We don't want to be that. But maybe we can make the case. You know, you know, without the help of God, and without my humility, I can become that way. I can betray him on some level so, so but in a certain sense, I'm every Gospel character, both men and women. And Saint Josemaria uses that consideration to write this point in *The Way*. He says, "Jesus is your friend, the friend with a human heart, like yours, with most loving eyes that wept for Lazarus. As much as he loved Lazarus, He loves you."

So, I so basically, yes, I am Lazarus. He would weep over me. He's my friend. And the sisters call Lazarus, referred to Lazarus, as "the one whom you love" when they talked, when they referred to Lazarus as they contacted Jesus to come cure him, they approached Jesus, they sent a message, "the one whom you love is sick." I am that man. And when the poor Samaritan woman had, she was living with her checkered past, burdened with her shameful sins. Jesus says to her, "If you knew the gift of God, who is it who asked you for a drink, you would have asked him for living water."

The way he loves the Samaritan woman, that mercy He lavishes on her, he lavishes on me; I am every Gospel character. And so, we want to, during these days of Lent, and Lent could serve as that Springboard, any way you want, any way I need to do, we follow the impulses of the Holy Spirit. But I think we could safely say to each other in our prayer, on some level, I need to include that in my Lenten devotions: a time for dialogue with Our Lord.

How do I do it? What must I do? The Catechism makes it very clear. Without the intervention of the Holy Spirit, I cannot pray. And I need to ask Jesus, "Lord, teach me to pray." That's the admonition from the Catechism in the section on prayer. "Lord, teach me to pray." And, the Apostle saw Our Lord's deep prayer, his meditation, and upon seeing that they asked him, "Lord, teach me to pray." And when Jesus teaches the Apostles to pray, he says, say, "Father," say, "Our Father."

Do I literally need to say, "Father," every time I pray? I don't think so. But I do know what we need to do is reflect, when I speak to the Lord, the Lord loves me. That's what Jesus says. When you pray, consider that the Lord loves me. And that if you engage Me, and I quote, St. Paul, "All things work out for the best for those who love God." So, yes, when I pray, I must say, "God loves me." How? As a loving father who happens to be love itself.

What is the staging area? Because the Lord at the same time needs my freedom. Notice in the Sermon of the Mount, he uses three different words to express the proper dispositions to pray. And in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7, I think it's 7:7. He says, "Seek... Ask and it will be given you, seek and you will find, knock, and it will be opened to you."

What does all this mean? What does ask mean? What does knock mean? What does seek mean? I would say the first step in prayer is a desire to know Our Lord. And I don't know, I could ask for, I could ask for what? I can just use the Lord's example. I could ask for, to grow a couple of extra inches. I've tried that, didn't work. I've asked for some of my favorite sports teams to win a championship. I didn't ask for it every year, maybe once in 20 years, and most of the time I get a no.

So, those kinds of things. I pray, "Well, listen, I'm a little bit late for this meeting. Lord, can you arrange the traffic pattern so that it dissipate a little bit so I could make it on time? Usually, He says no. So, what does all this mean? That I go to my prayer, yes, I should ask for all sorts of favors, of course. But I primarily go there to be more centered on Christ. I primarily go there to be more united to Christ.

And the door is not opened. The gift is not at my feet. He's not right in front of me. I need to knock on the door. What does that mean? I need to spend time, a set amount of time, in prayer. I need to knock on the door. And He'll open it! He said, "I'll open it." And if you ask, I will give it to you. If you ask for union with me, I'll give you the more important things. More charity. I'll give you whatever you ask from me as long as it contributes to your holiness.

If you look for Me, you have to look for Me, but you'll find Me. In Jeremiah 29:13, I'm not showing off, that keeps emerging in my breviary: "He will find Me if he seeks Me with his whole heart." So, that's what I need to do. And I go to the Blessed Mother, who is depicted by St. Luke, contemplating the events and the words of her Son. In two instances Luke does that. Mary, pray for us so that this time of Lent be a time of progress in my conversation with your Son.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations you have 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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