

Devout Life Teachings – Part IV

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PART IV – ACTIVE UNITIVE STAGE

4.01 – ACQUIRED CONTEMPLATION

[Meditation, Affective Prayer and Acquired Contemplation](#)

Looking back on this road, we see that mental prayer simplifies. The beginner uses [Meditation](#), a fairly complicated process which needs a book and requires the use of all his faculties – imagination, intellect and will. [Affective Prayer](#) simplifies meditation. The [imagination](#) focuses easily, the [intellect](#) quickly grasps the truths, and the [will](#) can pour out its prayers. (Since Brother Lawrence is the great writer about acquired contemplation, I will be quoting him frequently.)

In this unitive stage, affective prayer simplifies into [acquired contemplation](#).

“Contemplation” means “to look at” or “to gaze”. That is the soul’s prayer. She has acquired the power to gaze at God with very little effort. In [acquired contemplation](#), the imagination comes quickly into God’s presence. The intellect receives great light from one simple truth. The will finds itself going to God, without the need for many acts. The soul enjoys God’s presence and experiences some divine union, while the faculties do very little work.

The soul [glides along](#). God touches whatever faculty he chooses, the imagination by a picture; the intellect by a revelation, and the will by some delight. Although the soul remains active, God does most of the work. (“We must become perfect worshippers. That is what we will be in heaven.” (BL)

[Prayer Lasts Longer](#)

As prayer simplifies, it can also last longer. Words move into the background and the soul simply stays in God’s presence. The soul doesn’t do much “[praying](#)” because it enjoys [God’s presence](#). “My chief concern in these forty years is to always be in God’s presence.” (BL) This [prayer of simplicity](#) is so easy that the soul can be in God’s presence even when involved in works.

While using [acquired contemplation](#) in prayer, the soul uses [active recollection](#) when working. It remains in God’s presence by very simple interior acts. “I am so accustomed to God’s presence, that I always receive his help.” (BL) In the next stage (passive unitive

way) God will draw the soul into his presence whenever He wishes. This is the mystical gift of passive recollection.

The Actual Experience

In acquired contemplation, the soul enjoys a delight in prayer and has a vague vision of God's presence (with little intellectual activity). The soul might experience the Father's love for five or ten minutes, before needing to move to another thought. "If we knew our need for God's favors, we would always seek his presence." (BL)

Simplified Forms

By daily mental prayer, the soul acquires certain religious images, (as the Passion of Christ, or Christ's Eucharistic presence). As these forms possess the soul, the entire prayer life simplifies. Even during vocal or liturgical prayer, God absorbs the soul through these simplified forms. The advantages of acquired contemplation are obvious. Both prayer and work are done in God's presence. "I keep myself with God, at the center of my soul." (BL) The soul does less as God does more, both in prayer and in acquiring virtues.

The saints say:

1. *God will forbid no one to drink of the waters of contemplation. (STA)*
2. *Acquired contemplation is not perfect in its beginning stage. So, the soul must return to meditation, at times. (SJC)*
3. *When meditation produces the honey of devotion it is called contemplation. (SFdeS)*
4. *When God acts more and the soul less, the prayer is more perfect. (FjdeC)*

Group Discussion:

1. *Have you experienced any progress in prayer? Do you understand simplified forms? What blessings did you receive from these forms?*
2. *Can you describe God's touches on your soul? How do you dispose yourself for these Divine touches?*

4.02 – EXAMPLES OF ACQUIRED CONTEMPLATION

Early on this road, God can give prayer experiences which are contemplative. (The soul might not realize this). The following two experiences should encourage beginners to move along.

The Rosary

A young woman, at the beginning of her conversion, found herself forgetting to say the vocal parts of the rosary and even forgetting to have the beads slip through her fingers. At each mystery, she was content to picture the scene and do nothing else. There were

no distractions. The imagination was fixed and the intellect was still. At the end, there was an inner sense of God's presence, as if she had just received Holy Communion. "Somehow I forgot about vocal prayer." (BL)

The Woods

The seminary had beautiful woods that surrounded a large sports field. While at prayer, a seminarian found God leading his spirit to these fields. There he met God. He was alone with him. No words were said. There was just his presence. God was a Father and he was His son. God was the Lord and he was His disciple. God was the Spirit and he was His loved one.

This gift always began with a picture of a gospel scene and affective prayer. That was the door. Soon, however, God would lead him in spirit towards this field. God wanted to meet him at this field and let him rejoice in God's presence. Nothing had to happen. No need for words or revelations (although some might come). The prayer was full and complete. As the seminarian arrived at this field, God awaited him and he just stayed there.

Still a Beginner

Father Boylan in "This Tremendous Lover" had written clearly about the Dark Night and Infused Contemplation (Book Five). He said that no matter how exalted the prayer, if the person had never gone through the Dark Nights, they were still a beginner. This was wonderful. The seminarian could enjoy all the divine favors of Acquired Contemplation and still see himself as a "beginner".

These prayer favors began within a year of the original prayer experience. Therefore, Acquired Contemplation is not necessarily a long way off. When it is reached, the soul is still a "beginner".

God Gives to All

Acquired Contemplation is a level of prayer that God will give to everyone. It is the normal goal of mental prayer and everyone can arrive there, even within a short time. It is not extraordinary and demands no special favors.

The saints say:

1. *By ordinary grace, everyone can gain the state of prayer which is a "simple gaze" upon God. (BL)*
2. *During this stage, the soul should meditate sometimes and contemplate at other times. (SJC)*
3. *These souls are losing their first method of prayer but God is giving them a new spirituality. (SJC)*
4. *After I began to drink the waters of contemplation, God plunged me in. (STA)*

Group Discussion:

1. *How do you use your imagination in prayer? Do you experience a stillness? What scenes does the Spirit bring to your mind?*
2. *How long have you been practicing mental prayer? Have you been faithful to it? Have you been generous in giving time? Is it a daily part of your schedule?*

4.03 – EFFORTLESS SPEED

As a plane takes off, the passengers know they are moving quickly. Even as it climbs into the sky, they still feel the speed. However, as the plane pierces the clouds and reaches its cruising altitude, there is very little experience – even though the plane flies faster than ever. That is a picture for the three stages of prayer.

The Devout Life is a divine flight. In the purgative stage, the soul accepts the difficulties of leaving earth behind. In the illuminative stage, there is the power of climbing into the sun's light. In the unitive stage (where the greatest progress is made) the soul cruises along with less effort, as if nothing is happening.

A Row Boat With Sails

Since airplanes were not yet invented, the saints used a different model, a rowboat with sails. As the little boat leaves the world's harbor, the soul must row strenuously. Later, the ocean becomes calm and the soul, guided by the moral and theological virtues finds rowing very easy. But then comes another stage, God himself moves the soul.

The Change

Because the Spirit's wind fills the boat's sails, the soul does not need to row. The soul has to change its attention from rowing, to setting the sails to catch the new wind. When the wind blows, the oars are put away. The soul adjusts from actively practicing the virtues to yielding to the Spirit's gifts. The soul has become an experienced sailor ready to move quickly. The soul's powers (called virtues) are lifted up by the Spirit's powers (called gifts).

Some Examples

I'll give some examples: By the virtue of faith, the soul always tried to figure out and to discern God's will. By the gift of Counsel, the soul sees what God wants in a single glance.

By the virtue of Fortitude, the soul tried to be strong amid trials. By the gift of Fortitude, the soul enjoys God's own strength.

By the virtue of Faith, the soul believed in God's truths. By the gift of Understanding, the soul sees all these truths at once and how they come together in harmony.

By the virtue of Charity, the soul valiantly did God's will. By the gift of Wisdom, the soul relishes the Divine Will and finds an almost irreversible attraction to it.

By his gifts, the Spirit gains his greatest control over the soul.

The Shared Gift of Fortitude

The Spirit's gifts are best used when hearts join together. That was the story of St. Fulgentius of Ruspe (468-533). He entered a monastery governed by Felix, who asked him to be co-superior. For six years, they lived in great charity. In 499, they were both arrested. When the persecutors began beating Fulgentius, Felix said, "He is too delicate, whip me who am stronger". So, they beat Felix first and Fulgentius only later. The two shared in the Gift of Fortitude.

Helping Others

Another example of using gifts together happened to St. Paula (347-404) who, fortunately, gathered with other saints. She was 32, had five children, and was living in Rome, when her husband died. At this point, she met St. Marcella, also a widow, who brought her into a Devout Life. She also met and worked with St. Jerome.

He, however, left for Bethlehem. She and her daughter, St. Eustochium, desired a monastic life and joined him. Knowing Greek and Hebrew, she helped Jerome in his biblical work and, with her daughter, she founded monasteries and convents. To gain the fullness of divine life, the saints need other saints.

The saints say:

1. *Being in God's hands, I was stronger than all the devils. I could not even injure myself. (STA)*
2. *God, here I am. I am all yours. Fashion me according to your heart. (BL)*
3. *Let us stem God's tide no more. Let us break all our inner dams, opening the way for grace and making up for lost time. (BL)*
4. *I do not grow weary of crying out everywhere, "Abandonment, unbounded and unreserved abandonment to God's actions".(FJdeC)*

Group Discussion:

1. *Have you tried to foster the virtues? Where have you succeeded? Where have you failed? Are you still trying?*
2. *When have you experienced a new ease? When has the Spirit moved you more quickly? Are the virtues growing more powerful?*

4.04 – – PUTTING THE SPIRIT IN CONTROL

A man recounts his first attempts at skiing. On the first day, he started down the beginner's slope. When he was out of control, he just fell in the snow, got up and started again. When he arrived at the bottom, a ski instructor was ready to reveal all the secrets of successful skiing. By the third day, he was enjoying the trip down the slope without any falls.

In the Devout Life, there are three basic secrets to put the Holy Spirit in control.

1. Interiority
2. Generosity
3. Consciousness of the Spirit

Your Inner Thoughts

A priest would ask his school children, "Who is always in your dreams at night?" After many false guesses, someone would finally answer, "I am". In human life, a twenty four hour stream of thought flows within, and you are the thinking subject.

In the modern world, you no longer own that interior stream. Every time you turn on the radio, the television, the internet, the I-Pod, the Blackberry, others put their messages in your stream of consciousness. They even pay billions of dollars to have that privilege. The Devout Life turns off these external voices so the Spirit can guide you.

Listening

Do you keep giving advice to somebody who doesn't act on it? "Stop wasting your breath", they say. Well, the Holy Spirit doesn't waste his precious breath, either. He looks for souls with attentive ears.

When Samuel was young "a revelation of the Lord was uncommon" (Sam.3:11), meaning that the Spirit wasn't doing much speaking. God called to Samuel twice and he went to Eli, the high priest. However, Eli did not understand. Only on the third try, did Eli figure out that God was speaking. So, he told Samuel, "If you hear the voice again, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening'". With that advice, the whole history of Israel changed. The powerful prophet, Samuel, began his long career of listening to the Holy Spirit.

Knowing the Spirit

The Holy Spirit is not a dove, or a wind or a breath. He is not a voice. He is a Divine Person, just as the Father and Son are Divine Persons. He is called the "forgotten" and "unknown" Person, but He doesn't like those titles. He wants his presence to be seen through your human nature. Jesus received a human nature from His mother. The Holy Spirit is different. He uses your human nature.

In the Devout Life, you and the Holy Spirit work together. Until now, he has been "behind the scenes", hidden and unseen. All of that is about to end. The Holy Spirit will manifest himself in seven special ways, called sanctifying gifts. The following chapters

study all seven.

Use His Name

Businessmen and politicians who can remember names are usually successful. People respond to them. The Holy Spirit is the same. When you call him by name he responds mightily. So, pray often, "Come, Holy Spirit."

The saints say:

1. *God works quite differently when the soul keeps nothing back. (STA)*
2. *Happy the person to whom the Holy Spirit reveals his secrets, especially of Mary his spouse. (SLdeM)*
3. *An unmistakable sign of being led by the Spirit is to think and speak often of Mary. (SLdeM)*
4. *God transports our spirits like a giant picking up straw. (STA)*
5. *The soul collects the wood but only the Spirit enkindles the fire of divine love. (STA)*

Group Discussion:

1. *Have you begun to listen to the Holy Spirit? Have you been attentive and generous? What are the results?*
2. *Do you realize that the Holy Spirit will use your human nature? Are you willing to be his instrument?*

4.05 – THE GIFT OF COUNSEL

Padre Pio had an extraordinary gift of Counsel, knowing each penitent's secret thoughts and pointing out God's will. This Counsel was a charismatic gift, used for the good of the penitent. Counsel, the sanctifying gift, is personal, revealing God's will to you.

Jesus' first public use of Counsel was when he deliberately stayed in the Temple while his parents went back to Nazareth. His actions confused Mary and Joseph and Jesus had to explain, "Did you not know that I must do my Father's will?" The Father had revealed his will, but even his parents "did not understand what he said to them" (Lk.2:49-50). To reveal the Father's will to you, the Holy Spirit uses his gift of Counsel. He gives this power so the soul makes the right decision.

Some Extraordinary Graces of Counsel

This infused gift leads to surprising decisions. Francis of Assisi renounced his riches and became at odds with his father. Thomas Aquinas broke away from his family to join the Dominicans. St. Catherine of Sienna resisted her parents who wanted her to marry. St. Rose of Lima, a beautiful girl, also had to resist her family's desires to see her married. These saints responded according to God's will, even if they alienated others by their decisions.

By Counsel, the person no longer “figures out” the right decision. God infuses the right answer. The light comes from above (heaven), not from below, (the human intellect). By God’s vision, the soul sees each situation as God sees it. The answers come quickly. The soul knows exactly what to do and to say. When told not to preach anymore, Peter told the Jewish leaders, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

Because Counsel reveals God’s will in every situation, the devout soul has a new responsibility. When Counsel lights up God’s path, the soul must choose to walk it. Where does Counsel inevitably lead? To total and complete abandonment, into the arms of a loving Father.

The Role of a Spiritual Director

Counsel must operate under obedience to a director. All important enlightenments should be submitted to a spiritual director. Once these are confirmed, you can seek new enlightenment. The road to perfection always leads us on.

Some Saints and Counsel

As always, saints give the clearest examples.

When St. Damien was in the seminary, his older brother was ordained. However, he died before leaving for his mission assignment in Hawaii. Led by Counsel, Damien knew God wanted him to take his brother’s place. His religious superiors accepted his request and Damien was ordained in Honolulu, where he served as a parish priest.

Later, when the government decided to segregate some of his parishioners who were lepers to the island of Molokai, Damien’s frequent visits embarrassed the government. So, they decreed that no one was allowed to go back and forth. Most would have abandoned the mission, but the Spirit’s gift of Counsel guided Damien to his surprise decision. He would live and die with the lepers on the island of Molokai.

Another Example

Counsel led Mother Theresa from her teaching apostolate at a girls’ high school to serve the poor of Calcutta. As the work unfolded, the Spirit led her back to the girls’ school where she recruited volunteers, and began her world-wide congregation.

St. Jane de Chantel (a widow), knew to leave her adult children to found the Visitation Nuns with St. Francis deSales. St. Vincent dePaul knew how to structure his Sisters of Charity so they would be free to serve the people.

St. Teresa of Avila knew to leave her own convent and establish St. Joseph Convent in Avila, with strict enclosure and withdrawal from the world. By Counsel, the saints made surprising directions. Only later, could people see God’s wisdom in their choices.

The saints say:

1. *Right now, you are standing between heaven and hell. Both are open and waiting for you. May the Spirit's Counsel guide you always. (SFdeS)*
2. *When God acts as your guide, he demands complete confidence. (FJdeC)*
3. *To receive abundant divine light, the soul must not interpose its own will. (SJC)*
4. *To receive God's light, the soul just waits upon God's Spirit. (SJC)*

Group Discussion:

1. *Since beginning your Devout Life, how has God enlightened you? What surprising decisions have you made? What has been the effect?*
2. *Is God's light increasing? Extending to more aspects of your life? Has it brought about a new ordering of priorities?*

4.06 – THE GIFT OF PIETY

A loving father was strict with his young sons, but seeing that they had grown into very good adolescents, he changed his approach. One day, the youngest son said, "Dad has changed". This was true. He had always loved them as a father but now he had become a close friend. His sons had a new idea of their father. The gift of Piety accomplishes the same goal, giving us a new idea of God the Father. Paul describes this new gift, "You received a spirit of adoption through which we cry out "Abba" (that is, "Father") (Rom.8:15).

God, the Intruder

As the Devout Life begins, God is seen as a lawgiver. As the soul practices the virtues, God seems closer and more friendly. Finally, the gift of Piety fully reveals him as Father.

God is a Creator who cares for all his creatures. However, God is Father, only to those "who believe in Jesus' name" (Jn.1:12). These he empowers to become his children. After his resurrection, Jesus said to Magdalene, "I am going to my Father and your Father" (Jn.20:17). His death and rising had restored the original relationship which Adam and Eve had enjoyed. We, again, were his children and He was our Father.

Two Final Stories

At fourteen years of age, a young boy caught scarlet fever, which kept him in bed for four weeks. His father, who loved him deeply, altered his work schedule to come home for lunch. Every day, upon entering the house, he would immediately come upstairs.

One day, not realizing his weakness, the young man got out of bed and walked to the top of the stairs. He fainted and would have fallen down all the steps. However, his loving father had already ascended the stairs. When he fell, he fell into his father's arms. The gift of Piety reveals to the soul that the loving Father is always at the top of the stairs, not allowing us to fall.

A thirty five year old man frequently came home. His father would prepare a bowl of ice cream and some hot tea. One day, the man was deeply burdened because of a misunderstanding with his boss. After receiving the ice cream and tea, the man, surprisingly, began to weep profusely. He ate quickly and left the house to take a walk before his father could see. The weeping continued until his whole body was shaking. God spoke so clearly within. "Do you see the love that your father has shown for you? I do not see you as your superiors see you. I see you as your father does. The man was lifted up by the Gift of Piety.

The saints say:

1. *God is a good father. From experience I know that he causes everything to prosper for his children. (FjdeC)*
2. *The Father teaches me as if I were his favorite. He enjoys my company in a thousand ways. (BL)*
3. *God's heart seeks our love. The Father passionately commands us to love him. (SFdeC)*
4. *Be simple as a child. When the Father finds this quality in us he hurries his work. (FjdeC)*

Group Discussion:

1. *Since beginning your Devout Life, how has your idea of God changed? Do you experience His closeness? Have you seen his Fatherly care?*
2. *Can you cite moments when the Father saved you from harm? When he revealed his love? Do you experience God as Father in your mental prayer?*

4.07 – THE GIFT OF FORTITUDE

A seminarian often dreamed that he was being martyred. The only problem was, that just as he was about to be killed, he would wake up, very much alive, and having to face the difficulties of daily life. Martyrdom might require much less fortitude than fulfilling daily demands. One day, as St. Charles de Foucoud was in his hut in the African desert, a man broke in and killed "the holy man". This martyrdom was really a quick victory compared to his years spent in that desert, trying to evangelize.

The Virtue of Fortitude

At Baptism, God infuses both the virtue and the gift of Fortitude into our souls. The virtue begins to operate right away and prepares for later heroic acts.

The Little Flower used the virtue of Fortitude at the turning point of her whole life, the first step into a life of Fortitude. "On Christmas Day, 1886, after midnight Mass, I was excited to open my gifts. Daddy used to love to see my happiness. However, this Christmas, Daddy was irritated and said, (thinking I couldn't hear him) "Thank goodness, it's the last time we shall have this kind of thing". I went upstairs to remove my hat. My older sister, Celine, urged me not to go down. "It will upset you too much!" But Therese was not the same. In an instant, Jesus had changed her. "I suppressed the tears and

pulled out my gifts with great cheerfulness." Daddy laughed. Celine thought she was dreaming. I had gotten back the strength of soul I had lost as a four year old (when her mother died). On that glorious night, the third period of my life began."

The Gift of Fortitude

St. Therese practiced heroic acts of fortitude in her convent life. She appeared joyful when she took a demanding nun to supper every night. While in deep spiritual darkness, she showed so much joy that others thought she was enjoying consolations. She accepted the greatest physical pain associated with tuberculosis that eventually took her life. She was so peaceful in the midst of terrible physical sufferings that some nuns wondered if she was really sick. By using the virtue of Fortitude, (when she acted bravely as a little girl), she was able to receive the gift of Fortitude, by which she won the total victory against all odds.

St. Paul was martyred in Rome, but that was easy compared with his years of trials. He writes, "Five times at the hands of the Jews, I received forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. I passed a night and a day on the deep, on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own race, dangers from Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, among false brothers, in toil and hardship, through many sleepless nights, through hunger and thirst, through frequent fasting, through cold and exposure." (2Cor.11:24-27). Looking at St. Paul's trials, we ask "How did he do that?" He didn't. The Spirit within him accomplished the task. He will do the same for you.

Where to Begin

Dear reader, what should you do? Just begin where you are. Put your oar in the water and make daily acts of fortitude. Soon, the Spirit will send his wind and you will find yourself doing heroic acts for God.

The saints say:

1. *To accept afflictions from God is perfect love because the only thing loveable about afflictions is that they come from God. (SFdeS)*
2. *When I was a child, I was sad when I suffered, but now I relish these bitter fruits with peace and joy. (STL)*
3. *We must take courage. When Our Savior told us to fight, he also promised victory. (SFdeS)*
4. *The soul must have courage to walk firmly while the lightning flashes and the tempests roar. (FJdeC)*

Group Discussion:

1. *What were your initial difficulties in trying to live a Devout Life? How did you overcome*

- them? Did you gain a habit of fortitude, remaining strong when confronting difficulties?*
2. *What difficulties are you facing right now? How are you better prepared to confront them? Do you run away from difficulties?*

4.08 – THE GIFT OF FEAR OF THE LORD

Two young brothers, close in age, would get into fist-fights. One brother tended to punch the other in the stomach. The mother, fearing permanent harm, would always say, “Do not punch your brother in the stomach”. Of course, in the middle of the battle, the boy would forget mom’s words.

One day, he did hurt his brother and, as usual, his mother was upset and repeated her words, “Don’t I always tell you not to do that?” For the first time in his life, he experienced perfect contrition, total reverential fear. His mother could have given him any penance, he was truly sorry only because he hurt her. With the gift of Fear of the Lord, we dread every sin because it offends God.

Increasing Our Capacity

When the person experiences God’s closeness, a danger exists that God’s consolations could breed an unhealthy familiarity. In accepting his favors, the soul can forget God’s greatness and majesty and forget that we are all God’s creatures. The unfortunate effect of this familiarity is that God cannot bestow greater favors because he does not want to jeopardize our eternal salvation.

Fear of the Lord removes this problem and opens the devout soul to immense favors. When the soul has reverential fear, God can give visions, miracles, raptures and every possible gift. Yet, the soul will only see herself as a worthless creature.

A Saint

St. Margaret Mary, one of the Church’s greatest saints writes, “My Master always shows me how hideous are my faults. He reproves me most for my disrespect before the Blessed Sacrament. I am at peace only when I see myself unknown and buried in oblivion. I had such a horror for sin that I would have to hide so I could weep over my slightest fault”.

This tremendous fear prepared her for great gifts. “The Savior has poured out his graces so abundantly that I find it difficult to contain my joy. The joy is then replaced by fear that I would omit the smallest duties. My Savior took away my fears, saying that he would adjust the graces to my schedule”.

Her simplicity shines through in one letter. “My Savior revealed all the graces I would receive through devotion to the Sacred Heart. I asked him to give these graces to a worthy soul, since I am really an obstacle to His plan.” However, “He said that he chose

me because I was totally convinced of my nothingness and could not attribute anything to my own powers". By Fear of the Lord, this saint enjoyed extraordinary divine favors because she saw herself as worthless.

Sources of This Gift

In 1981, a priest died very young of a heart attack. His early death confronted another priest in a new way. He imagined his friend's soul leaving his body and coming before God. What was that like? What was the experience of appearing before God and entering eternal life? At that point, the priest could hold on to nothing. All that was being accomplished in his priesthood seemed so small. His own devotions seemed so little. Everything was overshadowed by the greatness of God. The priest was in his early forties at the time, but this gift has never left him. St. Teresa wrote, "When the soul sees God's greatness, it also sees its own lowliness."

The saints say:

1. *In prayer, God gave me the gift of fear, but it was so swallowed up in love that I never thought of punishment. (STA)*
2. *Fear of losing God overwhelms me and I can hardly write. (STA)*
3. *Love of God and fear of God are our two strong castles. We use them to war against the world, the flesh and the devil. (STA)*
4. *Fear surrounds the outside. Inside, the soul's joy and peace increase. (SJC)*
5. *In the middle of temptations, our love for God must have Fear of the Lord at its side. (STA)*

Group Discussion:

1. *Do you think much of your eternal salvation of your being with God forever? Are you overwhelmed by the thought of eternity? Do you see how unworthy you are?*
2. *Do you think much about God's greatness? Of his power and might? How does this affect you? Do you draw closer to him or pull further away?*

4.09 – THE GIFT OF KNOWLEDGE

On many summer nights, a devout man would take his little son for a walk to the playground. There, in the open field, he would look up at the sky, seemingly unable to remove his eyes from the stars. Once in a while, he would say, "Who can look at the heavens and not believe there is a God?" For him, the beauty of God was most evident on a starry summer night.

Creation is the catechism which God wrote for everyone to read. He wanted mankind to enjoy the warmth of the sun and the fruits of the harvest, so they would know how good he is. Adam lost that gift and now men see creation only as a fulfillment of their own needs. The Gift of Knowledge restores our sense of wonder and allows the devout soul to see how all creation glorifies God.

Appreciation

St. Francis of Assisi is well-known for his special relationship to creatures. One day, while he was preaching, a flock of birds were chirping away, disturbing his homily. He went over and preached to the birds. They listened attentively and then, at his command, they flew away. There was also the famous wolf of Bobbio, who terrorized the citizens. They called in St. Francis, who taught the wolf to protect the city and taught the people to care for the wolf.

Destruction

Unfortunately the world has rejected Francis' approach and has used the creation of the atom to unleash nuclear destruction. An atomic scientist said, "After the blast, we knew the world would not be the same. We had become destroyers of creation".

The Mystery of the Human Person

A very special priest meets many people and deeply loves every one of them. He enjoys this gift of Knowledge. As he comes into the person's presence, he is overwhelmed by this mystery of creation. God himself chose to create this man, or woman, or child. All through the conversation, he remains in this awe that God created this person.

These inner feelings determine everything. They determine how he responds to their requests or how to point out their failures. The more he experiences the gift, the more he feels at one with the person. That is how God feels, at one with his creation.

A Special Saint

The Carmelite, Brother Lawrence (author of the spiritual classic "The Presence of God") had a conversion experience which did not happen in the usual places (like a chapel) or in the usual way (like hearing a homily). One day, touched by a Gift of Knowledge, he looked at a withered tree and realized that, when springtime came, God would fill that tree with great beauty. This began his Devout Life. Forty years later, he wrote that this moment contained all the graces of his call to perfection. He was a unique saint. He found God everywhere and would prostrate in adoration on the floor of the kitchen, while preparing food for the other monks.

St. Augustine

When worldly souls are plunged into created things, they run away from God. When devout souls are plunged into created things, they enter into God's presence. Augustine describes the effects he experienced by the Gift of Knowledge. "I plunged into the lovely things which you created. You were with me but I was not with you. Therefore, created things kept me from you. But you called and you broke through my deafness. You dispelled my blindness. You touched me and I burned for you."

Walking By the Ocean

Many people enjoy walking along the ocean with the sun setting. All is at peace and in the heart is an overwhelming sense of God's majesty. You can use those imagined scenes in your mental prayer. No words need be said. Just enjoy the stillness of God in the majesty of his creation.

The saints say:

1. *By the gift of knowledge, the soul sees the multiplicity of God's beauty in created things. (SJC)*
2. *As my father and I walked home, I gazed with delight at the stars shining above. (STL)*
3. *When I saw the richness of this natural loveliness, my heart soared up to my Beloved, who had scattered such masterpieces all over our place of exile. (STL)*
4. *Saints in ecstasy are astonished by God's order in the smallest creatures like bees and ants. (SLdeM)*

Group Discussion:

1. *Where in creation do you most experience God's presence? Does nature ever bring you into God's presence? How does a star-filled night affect you?*
2. *How do you misuse creatures? When do you take creation into your own hands?*

4.10 – THE GIFT OF UNDERSTANDING

1. K. Chesterton wrote about his conversion to the Catholic Church, "I decided to build my own religion. When I had put the last board in place and I stepped back to see what was built, I realized I had constructed Catholic orthodoxy".

Devout souls do not need the genius of Chesterton to construct their religious beliefs because the Catholic Catechism defines all these truths. However, souls do need the Gift of Understanding so they can pierce deep inner meaning of these truths and see their harmony.

No Attraction Yet

One day at the park, two nine year old boys were on the swings. One yelled to the other, "This is great. There are no girls around to ruin our fun". Not yet awakened to sexual attraction, the great mystery of the opposite sex had no hold upon them. Many people see God like these boys viewed girls. They are not awakened to God and have no interest in knowing Him. Devotion changes that. The mysteries begin to attract as the brilliant gift of Understanding claims their hearts. Here are a few examples.

On the night of his priestly ordination, a priest frequently woke up and found his heart saying, "I am a priest. I am a priest". This is something which happens frequently in his prayer. He doesn't discover any new truth. The Spirit just impresses the same overwhelming truth, "I am a priest". The effects are deep. A layperson could ponder a different truth, "I am baptized or I am a temple of the Holy Spirit". At Communion, the person should be overwhelmed, realizing that "Jesus is within me".

As a priest was teaching first graders, the religious sister told him that one boy had questions and even she wasn't sure of the answers. The little boy asked, "Is the blood of Jesus present in the host?" "Is the body of Jesus present in the wine?" "Are the Father and the Holy Spirit present with Jesus in the host?" The child's mind was being touched with Understanding. St. Thomas Aquinas asked the same questions.

A Mystic

By Understanding, the truths of faith became more real than the truths of earth. A mystic goes through total darkness every Lent. On Easter, Jesus has some gift for her. A priest asked her, "What gift did Jesus give you this year?" She said, "His presence in the Eucharist is so real, that you could cut off my arm and I still would not deny it". What happened? She has believed in Jesus' presence in the Eucharist since childhood but Understanding flooded her intellect with new and total certainty.

One day, a priest was pondering Jesus' power over Satan. Wherever Jesus went, Satan had to leave. Suddenly, he realized why Jesus wanted to die on the cross. Dying was the only way he could get to the tomb where Satan was in control. What good would it be if Jesus totally healed the world but Satan still owned the tomb? Satan won't be at your tomb. Jesus cleaned him out of there.

These catechism truths capture our souls because the Spirit writes their full meaning on our soul. Mary is the best example. Our Lady used the gift of Understanding. She was always "pondering these things in her heart". (Lk.2:51)

The Saints Say:

1. *God gives souls a profound knowledge. They see the greatness of God and see that they do not really know him. (STA)*
2. *At times, God's special light gives a sublime contemplation of heavenly mysteries. Discovering a beauty that we could never imagine, we fall into a state of wonder. (SFdeS)*
3. *God has given me to understand that all we cherish under the sun is fleeting and to love him is all that lasts. (STL)*
4. *For years I read much about God and understood nothing. Then God taught me everything in one minute. Even my confessor was astounded at what I knew. (STA)*

Group Discussion:

1. *Since beginning your Devout Life, what Catholic truths have meant much more to you? How did these mysteries come alive for you? Do you feel that you have entered a new world?*
2. *What awakened you? Can you recall special moments of this awakening? When does your mind ponder these mysteries?*

4.11 – THE GIFT OF WISDOM

Working with her husband, Dr. Marie Curie, the brilliant Polish chemist, won the Nobel Peace Prize (1911). Their living conditions were deliberately stark. They had no chairs in their apartment/laboratory because they did not want guests to stay long. Their ascetical discipline was rewarded with constant insights. They climbed the great mountain of wisdom and understood the qualities of radium (1902).

So it is with the devout soul. Wisdom is the summit. The soul gains Wisdom only by a thousand self-denials and many moments of God's light. Standing on this mountain top, the soul views everything at once. To this soul, God has become the beginning, the end and the way. The sacred writer would say, "Give me wisdom, the attendant at your throne" (Wis.9:4) and "I sought to take her for my bride" (8:12).

Wisdom sees all and relishes all. The gift of Wisdom and the virtue of Charity are sisters. Charity unites the will to God. Wisdom makes all the other faculties docile to charity so they, also are joined.

By Wisdom, the soul sees that the Devout Life is a love story and that God has brought this little soul into his own heart. After tasting Wisdom, the soul sees no sacrifice as too great. No trial is too powerful. She sees. She tastes. She relishes. God is all she wants. If God draws her into the Dark Night of Infused Contemplation, she will not hold back.

As he pours out his Wisdom, the Holy Spirit whispers to the soul, "Set me as a seal on your heart, and as a seal on your arm, for love is as strong as death and its flames are a burning fire" (Song 8, 6-7). St Augustine wrote, "O my God, to you do I sigh day and night. You drew me to yourself that I might see. You overcame the weakness of my vision and sent forth the strong beams of your light. Now, I hunger and thirst for more."

Many chapters have explained this road. In the next chapter, I will describe a soul who has reached this point in the road.

The saints say:

1. *When the soul drinks God's wisdom it forgets the world's beauty and sees its own knowledge as pure ignorance. (SJC)*
2. *It is quite impossible to describe the secrets of heaven in the words of earth. (STL)*
3. *Wisdom means a delectable knowledge, a taste for God and his truth. (SLdeM)*
4. *Wisdom sets souls on fire. They want to do great works for God's glory and for souls. (SLdeM)*

Group Discussion:

1. *Do you feel God has rewarded your sacrifices in living devoutly? What changes have you seen? What do you now relish? What are your spiritual desires?*
2. *How have your tastes and your desires changed? How do you now see the things of earth? What attracts you to God?*

4.12 – A DEVOUT SOUL IN THE UNITIVE STAGE

The devout soul has walked this road of perfection for some time, and has reached the point to which God wants to take every soul. I will try to describe this moment. You, the reader, must believe that God will lead you to this level.

1. These souls awaken in the morning, dedicated to definite periods of prayer.
2. They have no doubt that they will keep their commitment to prayer.
3. They know their prayer will be fruitful.
4. They know they will experience God's presence throughout the day.
5. They are deeply sensitive to what God expects.
6. They respond to God's inspirations because they are always in His presence.
7. They realize when they no longer experience God's presence.
8. They are keenly aware when they are not following God's will.
9. Doing God's will has become second nature.
10. They experience a deep peace.
11. God reveals to them their inner feelings.
12. They always find God's help in their trials.
13. They experience God as their Father.
14. They cling to Jesus, the way to the Father.
15. They experience the Holy Spirit as a Divine Person.
16. They follow the Spirit's direction.
17. They sorrow only when they fall short of God's will.
18. They find any deliberate sin, even venial, a violation of their covenant with Jesus.
19. They cannot live without the Eucharist or confession.
20. They are totally bonded to God and find complete freedom.
21. They exist only to serve God, especially to help him save souls.
22. They hope that God will totally absorb them.
23. Their will is fixed on God.
24. They experience God everywhere.
25. They live in God's face.
26. They love Mary with all their heart.

This is the picture of souls in the active unitive stage. They have gained an intimacy with God, who wants to absorb them into himself. Their life is very simple. This stage is unitive, drawing everything into a oneness. These qualities don't suddenly appear. The Divine artist must touch each part of his canvas until the full beauty comes forth. The following chapter explains these 26 points.

The saints say:

1. *Souls without prayer are like paralyzed people, unable to move their spiritual hands and feet. (STA)*

I just abide in God's presence, and have a wordless, secret conversation between myself and God which never ends. (BL)

2. *The time of prayer is not different from other times. We are one with God in time of action and of prayer. (BL)*
3. *God wants an empty space in the most remote corner of our soul to communicate himself at every moment. (FjdeC)*

Group Discussion:

1. *Which points above do you experience already? Can you put these graces in your own words?*
2. *What points are new to you? What ones do you not yet experience or understand? (Answering these questions will prepare you for the next chapter.*

4.13 – EXPLAINING THE PICTURE

The previous chapter reveals the goals of a truly Devout Life in 26 points. Here, I will explain each of these parts:

These souls awaken in the morning, dedicated to definite periods of prayer.

Prayer is the soul's mindset. Just as a business person mentally outlines what they must accomplish each day, so devout souls plot out their obligation to pray. A successful day is a day of talking to God. Devout souls see nothing else as primary (although all the cares of the world are in their heart).

They have no doubt that they will keep their commitment to prayer.

To pray is their greatest privilege and their most important duty. Prayer is so imbedded that they always keep their commitment to pray. They fulfill all the demands of charity and of obligation, but prayer guides their daily schedule. They could not tolerate a day in which they did not pray. To devout souls, prayer is more important than food or drink. They feast on prayer.

When Jakov, the Medjugorje visionary, ceased having his visions of Mary, he greatly missed this daily joy of talking to Mary. Similarly, a devout soul would find a day without prayer very difficult.

They know that prayer will be fruitful.

At this stage, their prayer is constantly fruitful. Sometimes, they experience an overwhelming sense of God's presence. At other times, just a divine peace. God always touches them in prayer and they always receive some divine blessing.

They know they will experience God's presence throughout the day.

Even amid the greatest activity, they seek God (active recollection). They do their tasks well, but are not absorbed by them. The heart is kept for God.

They are deeply sensitive to what God expects.

The natural person is concerned about self. The loving person is concerned about others. The devout person is totally concerned about God. What God expects of them dominates their day. (The devout soul never separates God and neighbor. Both are in his heart.)

They respond to God's inspirations because they are always in His presence.

All day long, they ask "What does God want now?" God answers them by inner attractions (called "inspirations of grace"). These souls are experts. The tiniest clue reveals God's will. They hear the softest inner voice. God's smallest prompting reveals what He wants. God's inspirations touch everything – their thoughts, feelings, words and tasks, even the very quality of their emotions.

They realize when they no longer experience God's presence.

The soul experiences God everywhere and in every situation. Even with this attraction, their human nature can pull them away from God and absorb them. The soul senses this and knows when it has left the Father's presence. God's inner work is vast and the soul can respond to only a few of these inspirations. God always knocks at their door. Sometimes they answer. Sometimes they don't answer. However, they realize when they have responded and when they haven't.

They are keenly aware when they are not following God's will.

During each day, these souls experience an inner restlessness when they are away from God's will. In these moments, they simply turn to God, who then shows them his Divine Will and how to return to it.

God wants the devout soul to be at certain places at certain times. He gives them a "spiritual sense" which whispers, "This is where you should be. Just stay here" or "This is not where I want you to be, so don't stay".

An Example

St. Faustina was dancing with a boy, when everyone disappeared and she saw Jesus. He told her that he didn't want her to be there. When everyone re-appeared, she excused herself and went to a church. Jesus appeared again, telling her to take the train and go to Cracow. These were her first steps toward joining the Sisters of Mercy. This extraordinary story shows that God wants us to be where he wills.

Doing God's will has become second nature.

After years of trying to do God's will (every moment of every day) they acquire a pervasive "second nature" (grace). Although their "self-absorbed nature" still functions, their "grace nature" constantly moves them to serve God and not self during every day.

They experience a deep peace.

Seeking only God's will gives them peace. If they get served good food, they enjoy it. If they get served poor food, they enjoy it. In every moment, they only want God's will. That is "their food", "to do the will of the one who sent me." (Jn. 4:34)

They live totally "from within". External events don't shatter their emotions because they always seek the same goal – to do God's will. Situations change but their goal remains constant.

God reveals their inner feelings.

During storms, the pilot looks at his instrument panel to see where he is. God has given these devout souls an unbelievable internal instrument panel to show them where they are with God. These souls are precious to God who always guides them by their inner emotions.

They always find God's help in their trials.

Devout souls go through trials that no one else could survive. During these trials, God knows that they will seek him in prayer. There, he always provides some answer (or some relief). Being saved by God so often, they are convinced that God will always find some way to rescue them. When they are weak, God answers quickly. When they are strong, God delays the answer knowing that they will gain even greater glory by persevering in the trial.

They experience God as their Father.

Devout souls relate to God as a child relates to the most benevolent father. Years of devotion have formed this Father-child relationship, which comes from religious experiences not from religious books. They have experienced the Father's benevolence in ways which nobody else would believe.

They cling to Jesus, the way to the Father.

Devout souls know that the kingdom of God is a great mystery, filled with saints, angels, religious experiences, dark trials, unbelievable consolations, divine inspirations and inner revelations. They also know that they can get lost on the road of perfection. So, they cling to the humanity of Jesus (especially in the Eucharist) and focus all their religious experiences upon him. St. Teresa writes, "In all my trials, I know I have a good Friend at my side."

They experience the Holy Spirit as a Divine Person

The Spirit does for devout souls exactly what he did for Jesus. He absorbs them into the Trinity. He prays within them. He drives them into the solitude of contemplation or into the activity of the crowds. They experience the Spirit just as Jesus described him.

They follow the Spirit's direction.

The Spirit guides all their decisions. These souls refuse to follow their passing impulses or their own thoughts. They go where the Spirit leads them. Even if the Spirit removes their religious consolations and seemingly abandons them, they still wait for the Spirit to lead.

They sorrow only when they fall short of God's will.

They do not worry about honors or power or titles or pleasures or riches. Losing these worldly honors causes them no difficulties. They sorrow only when they have disappointed Jesus. When this happens, they go to him in prayer, gain his forgiveness and move on. Teresa writes, "My only sorrow is when Jesus looks at me after I have failed him."

They find any deliberate sin, even venial, a violation of their covenant with Jesus.

They are not scrupulous. They know the difference between serious sin and venial sin. But for them, any deliberate sin, even venial, violates their covenant with Jesus. What others would do without any thought, they shrink from. They would not tell a lie to save themselves from death. They regret any unkindness. They do not talk about the faults of others. When they have time to weigh their choices, they never choose sin. Jesus has been so good to them that offending him is unthinkable.

They cannot live without the Eucharist or confession.

They always prepare for Mass by serious prayer. They relish the moments of Eucharist and experience Communion's effects all day long.

They have similar feelings towards confession. Living in God's light, they see their faults. Confession quiets all their fear. When they receive absolution, they rejoice more than even the greatest sinner.

They are totally bonded to God and find complete freedom.

They fear saying "No" to God and feel safe only when absorbed in God. They see their free will as dangerous and often ask God to take away their freedom to offend him. They enjoy complete freedom in God alone.

They exist only to serve God, especially to help him save souls.

They see each soul as an infinite mystery, a person who will live forever. They are consumed for souls. They will do anything to preach the gospel and will make hundreds of hidden sacrifices to win graces for lost souls.

They hope that God will totally absorb them.

Knowing what God has already accomplished in them, they want to come under his power even more. They seek to be absorbed by Him, no matter what the cost. God stands at the top of the mountain and the soul remains in the valley constantly trying to

climb into the divine presence. Each day, the soul tries again, always trusting that soon God will lift them to the mountaintop – in his time.

Their will is fixed on God.

If they had access to billions of dollars, they would experience no greed. If they were deprived of everything, they would be quite content. Their will is totally fixed on God, like a compass needle always pointing to heaven.

They experience God everywhere.

Nothing is an obstacle to their experiencing God's presence. Whether they are alone or with others, in church or in the world, God is present and He always has them to himself.

They live in God's face.

They do not hide from God like Adam. They are children of the light and of the promise. Living in God's face, they turn away from their own darkness.

They love Mary with all their heart.

Wanting the blessing of his father (Isaac), Jacob obeyed his mother (Rebecca). These souls also know the secret of gaining the Father's blessing. They allow Mary to cover them with Jesus' clothing and to prepare the right food so they gain the blessing. They practice deMontfort's True Devotion realizing that Mary will supply whatever is lacking in them. (Refer to Book Six)

Conclusion

At this stage, all the soul's efforts have become totally fruitful. These faithful souls have "lost themselves" in God's light.

They have followed Christ as far as the road goes. Jesus says, "Where I go, you cannot follow but I will come back and take you to myself". Now, the path leads into the supernatural prayer of infused contemplation which only God can grant them. The next section explores that unique part of the road that needs God's special intervention.

The saints say:

1. *These souls neglect their own interests to serve the Master's at every moment. (FjdeC)*
2. *A soul in total submission to God has a great capacity to serve him. (FjdeC)*
3. *Accustom yourself to practice silence. (STA)*
4. *Some people discourage this unlimited seeking of God, as if it were dangerous. (STA)*
5. *A resolute soul knows that it cannot retreat. It has gained too much. (STA)*
6. *My best remedy is to fix my mind on Jesus. Without God's favors, nothing is accomplished. (STA)*
7. *Let Jesus find one soul where he can be a guest. (STA)*
8. *God's goodness never fails his friends. (STA)*

9. *We please God and find his favors only through Jesus' Sacred Humanity. (STA)*
10. *A soul filled with holy desires is always hungry. (SJC)*

Group Discussion:

This chapter contains so many points that discussion can be very helpful to assimilate everything.

1. *Looking at these 26 points, which ones do you experience now? When did they begin? How did you practice them? What are the effects?*
2. *Looking at these 26 points, which ones are new to you? Can anyone else in the group help you or explain this point?*
3. *Which points especially attract you? How will you gain them?*