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Day of Recollection

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When Martin Luther started the Protestant revolution, he was driven by an uncontrollable desire for spiritual consolations. He mistook spiritual consolation with God's approval and since he did not receive many spiritual consolations, he eventually changed his theology in order to conform to his spiritual self-torture and dryness. At the same time, when Martin Luther was going around seeking every form of spiritual consolation, God raised a spiritual movement in Spain which would reject consolations as the judgment of one's spiritual life and which promoted the absolute rejection of all forms of consolation as being normative for one's spiritual life. This spirituality was the forming of the Carmelite spirituality and it accentuates a teaching of Christ which is needed in the modern age which reduces the theological and spiritual down to the subjective religious experience. This Carmelite doctrine which is taught by the Church in every generation and exhorted by all saints, is the doctrine of detachment.

Detachment, sometimes called Holy Indifference, is the withholding of affection from creatures to God alone. What this means is that one desires nothing, seeks after nothing, wants nothing except God alone. Holy Indifference means that when it comes to the created order we are completely indifferent as to what happens to it and to us. We are not indifferent or detached than for any other reason than God alone. We are not detached because these things are evil; we are detached because they are good and since they are good they can come between us and God. This detachment has to be complete. Some people give up some things but remain attached to others.

The Saints have taught us that there are three stages in the interior life, the first is the purgative way, the second is the illuminative way and the third is the unitive way. The illuminative way is when God fills us with knowledge of Himself which is unattainable through the natural light of reason or theological reflection. The unitive way is when one arrives at perfect union with God through mystical marriage. The purgative way is broken into two parts. The second is called passive purgation and that is when God takes over the purgative process in order to eradicate from us any imperfection whatsoever. This is necessary because our imperfections are so deeply imbedded in our souls that we ourselves are incapable of getting them out, so God must do it. This is what purgatory consists in, but in this life we can undergo passive

purgation only after we have undergone the first type of purgation called active purgation. This is the mortification, prayer and penance we can do ourselves which does away with our imperfections. But again, this is not powerful enough to fully eradicate our imperfections, God must do the rest.

But like a good Father, He only steps in when his child cannot do something. In other words, a good father does not do a child's homework. Rather, the child is left to do it on his own until he comes to something which he cannot do and then he goes to his father to ask for help. A good father helps the child but only with the child's cooperation; he does not do the child's homework himself, he helps the child to do it. Passive purgation is like that in that God, without cooperation, purifies us. But active purgation we must do on our own first, just as the child must do what he can before he goes to his father. It is disingenuous on the side of the father and the child if the child goes to the father before he really needs to out of laziness or something of this sort. Rather, the child must do everything he can first, before he goes to the father. Likewise, we must purge ourselves of everything we possibly can on our own before we go to God and expect Him to do His part. Too often people go to God and expect Him to do their work in the purgative process.

During the purgative process we become less attached to the things of this world and more attached to God. It begins with Gift of the Holy Ghost of Fear of the Lord which is the turning away from earthly things toward God. Wisdom begins with Fear of the Lord because we cannot gain true wisdom until we see God as our end and not the world. As long as we do not turn away from the things of this world, we will never reach sanctified perfection nor wisdom. Therefore, we ought to take a little time and reflect upon the various things which we are attached to and discuss the dangers these attachments present in the spiritual life.

There is another very serious reason that attachments must be avoided at all costs. St. John of the Cross, in reformulating what Our Lord said about where our treasure is there also is our heart, noted that any time we have an attachment to a created thing, that thing takes its place in our heart. Now since our heart is finite, it means that thing is going to take up the amount of room in our heart proportionate to how much we treasure it. We all know that two things cannot occupy the same space at the same time, and therefore any time I have some created thing as my treasure, it takes its place in my heart and that is just that much more room that God cannot take in my heart. If God is to be everything to me, if He alone is to be my treasure, then He alone

can occupy my heart and therefore I can desire nothing other than Him; I cannot become attached to anything other than Him.

Another very serious reason is that attachments are the things which Satan uses to get us to sin or at least to not do God's Will. In other words, Satan uses our desires for certain created things in order to tempt us and move us to things which we know are wrong. If I have holy indifference with respect to members of the opposite gender, I am incapable of being moved to lust. If I have holy indifference with respect to materially created things, I will not be tempted to steal, cheat or work excessively to obtain them, e.g. on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation. If we have Holy Indifference to everything in our lives, we render Satan powerless with respect to tempting us and for this reason alone we ought to be sure that we never attach ourselves to anything but God. Moreover, it is by our attachment that Satan binds us and holds us captive so that the only way that we can truly be free from that menace, is to have no attachment to any created thing whatsoever so that we steal from him the very chains, as it were, by which he is able to hold us fast.

Lastly, attachments occur in our wills and appetites. The will is that faculty by which we choose; it is that which has freedom for self determination in us. The appetites are the concupiscible appetite which deals primarily with bodily and material goods, such as food and material possessions. The irascible appetite is that which moves us to attain good things but can often go awry, e.g. it is the appetite which is the place of courage or fortitude but it is also the appetite of anger. Now we can have attachments in our concupiscible appetites, e.g. when we desire things contrary to the sixth commandment as well as in our irascible appetite, e.g. when people become attached to being angry with something and find it difficult to give up their anger. The primary difference between appetite and will is that appetite is bodily and has its motions prior to our control over them where as the will is a free faculty, capable of choosing different things based upon the judgement of our intellect. Appetites move without reason and therefore can be unreasonable. The attachments occur in both the appetites and the will and so we must mortify them to be sure that they always act for the good. Any time you have antecedent appetite, i.e. motions of desire or anger or things of this sort independently of reason, then you have attachments in your appetites.

Attachments are divided into three categories, viz. the world, others and ourselves. It would be best for us to start with the discussion of how we are attached to the world. Christ often talks about the world as if it is evil and to be avoided. By this He does not mean that the very things He created are evil, but that they are good and it is

precisely because they are good that they can be bad for us insofar as we can become fixated on them and that is why they should be considered evil, again not in themselves, but with respect to us. The first thing that to which people are attached are their worldly possessions, i.e. things. People are attached to their house, their cars, their furniture, their family heirlooms, i.e. they are attached to just about any physical thing you point to. We must turn away from these things and turn to God because if we do not they get between us and God. For example, if our grandson comes over to the house and breaks our family heirloom, our attachment to it drives us to anger or sorrow as a result of its loss. And so we lose charity and chew the child out. If there is anything that you possess whatsoever that would cause you sorrow in its loss then you are attached to that object. If there is anything which, if damaged or lost, would move you to anger, then you are attached to that object. Holy Indifference means that if these things are damaged or lost, we are able to maintain complete equanimity, not out of a force of our will, but out of a complete peace about all earthly goods.

Very often our work or jobs can become something which we are attached to so that if we lose them we become sad. Now we are not talking about a legitimate concern to be able to support oneself or one's family, but if one is perfectly detached from his job, then when it is lost, he can abandon himself perfectly and freely to whatever Divine Providence might bring. Ask yourself this, if you lost your job, or if your spouse lost his job, or if your parents lost their jobs, would that cause anxiety for you or would you throw yourself into the hands of God knowing that He knows what is best for you and thereby take complete solace in His Providence or would you walk around writhing your hands and fretting about every little thing you might lose because of the loss of your job? If your job is that important to you, it is a sign that you are not detached from it and as a result you do not depend on God's Providence enough, at least psychologically, and therefore the job is more important to you than God and His Will for you expressed through His Providence.

St. Augustine used to say "if you possess a thing, it possesses you." In other words, anything that you are attached to, binds you from acting in a completely spiritually free manner. It does not mean we sell off everything we have. It does not mean we walk around without taking any initiative financially. It means that we do it for the sake of God and not for our sake. One must try to be stable in his work history for the sake of fulfilling God's Will of providing for my family. One maintains physical possessions not because he should be attached to them, but because he must do it to fulfill God's Will that he take care of his family and provide for their needs. How

many people buy things, and this is especially important now that people are buying for the holidays, because they think it is what God would have them buy? Most people buy things because it is what they want, not what they need and even if they need it, the need is accompanied with all sorts of wants. If we bought only those things that God would have us buy, how many of us would have all of the things which clutter our houses or places of residence? Materialism is manifestation of a society which does not have control over its attachments.

Material things are also dangerous because they move us to sin, not only at their loss but also by desire. We see things we want them and as a result we allow them to cloud our appetites and wills making us act unreasonably. For instance, if your house was wiped out by a tornado tomorrow, could you act completely reasonable in acquiring another house or in dealing with the lost of your other house? How many of you have, either in your youth or, heaven forbid, as you got older, allowed yourself to really desire some material thing?

The next category of things to which we can have an attachment are other people. Other people can cause all sorts of difficulties for one's spiritual life and they depend on the various types of relations and things involved in those relations. Starting with the relationship a man and his wife have to each other, if it is not based purely on the love of God, then it is already prone to difficulties. While a man and a woman may marry because of the natural love they have for each other, this love can actually come in the way of their marriage.

Love is defined as willing the good of another and it is understood in two ways. The first is that one desires the other person as a good for oneself, so those who are married may experience a desire to live with the other person for the rest of their life and to enjoy those things proper to marriage. The other aspect of love is willing the good for the other person for his or her sake and not for one's own sake. Often we see in marriage that someone is very giving to the other individual for no other reason than the fact that they love the person.

But this natural love can cause difficulties. For example, natural love can degenerate very easily into a selfish desire for the person to be subservient to one's own intentions and desires. Moreover, if one loves one's spouse too much, God may call upon one of the spouses to perform some heroic act of Christian virtue and the spouse will discourage him or her from doing it out of his own natural love for the person, e.g. if God is calling someone to be a martyr, if one spouse loves that person out of a natural

love, he or she may discourage him or her from submitting to martyrdom due to a natural love for them.

Moreover, if one loves one's spouse with a natural love, it means that there is not that much room in the person's heart for God. God is a jealous God; He wants every iota of our love and I mean all of it. He is not interested in sharing it with anyone else and if you are willing to supplant the love you should have for God with the love of your spouse, you are placing your spouse before God and that is tantamount to idolatry. Therefore, you cannot have attachments even to your spouse. Not that natural love is bad, on the contrary it is good, but like any other good, it can get in the way of our love for God alone. God said we are to love Him with our whole heart, how can we love our spouse with a natural love and still love God with our whole heart? Later we shall discuss charity which will help to put this in perspective, but for now we must concentrate on recognizing our disordered attachments.

Parents often find it difficult to lose a child and this is because of their attachments to them. How many parents could, with Holy Indifference, witness the death of their child with total emotional equanimity? Not many, I presume, but that is a sign that they are attached to them. Many times have parents impeded a child from becoming a priest or entering a religious order out of their own inordinate attachment to the child. In the life of St. Thomas Aquinas, his parents thought that Thomas should first get married and carry on their noble lineage. But when St. Thomas told them he wanted to become a religious, they thought that it would be better that he be the head of some monastery or a secular priest so that he could be a bishop and be of importance. But then St. Thomas told them of his intention to enter the Dominicans which is a mendicant, i.e. a begging, order which was set about in intellectual pursuits and had no prestige in St. Thomas' day. The parents went so far as to kidnap the saint, lock him in their castle and then later a woman of ill repute was sent into his room in order to tempt him out of his religious fervor and conviction of God's Will for him. St. Thomas grabbed a hot poker from the fire place and chased the woman out of the room and then knelt down and begged God to never to allow him to fall into the sins against impurity. God then sent an angel who fastened a mystical cincture around his waste, causing him so much pain that he cried out in the vision. From that day forward he never had a single thought against those two commandments. But notice that St. Thomas asked for perfect observance of the commandments and in that he was asking for a detachment from the bodily goods associated with the conjugal life and it is through his desire for detachment that God works the miracle. But to go back

to our original point, the parents of St. Thomas tried to impede the child in entering the religious life and so their attachment to him came between themselves and God. But had St. Thomas not had a strong resolve, the parents might have come between him and God and thereby impeded the will of God because of their attachments to him and his earthly success.

Another case in which parents can adversely affect the child's doing the will of God is demonstrated in a story of a friend of mine who entered a Carmelite monastery of strict observance. When my friend made known to his parents his intention to enter the monastery, the father took it very hard because of his attachment to the child. While allowing the child to enter because he was of age, the father cried around and made it very difficult for the child emotionally. After this friend of mine entered the monastery, his father was driving the cattle out of the mountains in Wyoming. At the time the snow was falling and he began the descent down the mountain. In the process, his horse slipped and fell. When the horse tried to get up, it thrashed about and kicked his father in the head. Those who were with him some time later noticed that he was not behind them on his way down the mountain. They went back and found him and took him to a hospital where he laid unconscious for 3 days. When he awoke, he told the others that they had to go back up the mountain and get his gun which came out of its holster when he was kicked in the head and it was still up there. When they went to get the gun they noticed something peculiar; they noticed that where they found him and where he was kicked in the head was over 150 feet and yet, there were no tracks in the snow between the two places. Since the weather was cold, the snow had preserved the markings and they could see where the horse ran off, but his tracks did not leave from the place he was kicked in the head. They retrieved the gun and went back to the hospital to ask him about it. He told them that when he was kicked in the head, his guardian angel appeared to him and carried him 150 feet to where they found him. Then as they were coming down the mountain his balance was gone from getting kicked in the head so his guardian angel held him on the horse until he got down the mountain. From that day forth, his father never questioned his son's entrance into the monetary. But parents, like his father, can make it very difficult for a child for becoming a priest or enter a monastery because of their inordinate attachment to the child. Parents must be detached for the spiritual benefit of the child.

Children can have attachments to parents which can likewise affect their carrying out God's will for them. For instance, there are some cases in which priests have refused

to take a new assignment because they would have to move away from their parents. Those who have vocations must be particularly sensitive to this, viz. they cannot make their families or their parents the basis for their decision regarding their vocation. For example, it may be God's Will that a particular man join a religious order which is a distance away from his family and if he is overly attached to his family, he may not do God's Will as a result. When people discern their vocation, they must first and foremost try to grasp what God is intending for them and act on that alone. Even if that is their intention, if they are overly attached to their parents or family or friends, it can affect their capacity to judge these matters clearly. Moreover, children have to be sure that if their parents suffer from moral difficulties and want the child to do things contrary to God's Will, they must seek a detachment so that they can carry out God's Will. If one is attached to one's parents it may move the individual to striving for the parents attention causing problems among siblings. Siblings must not become attached to each other as well. Padre Pio once said that the first thing God does to someone he wants to make a saint is to take them away from their family. St. Francis De Sales said that he never went home without losing fervor and this is because it is too easy to become attached to our families.

Outside the family there are friends and those we meet. It is amazing how much people are attached to the respect of their friends and others even though they may not even know them. Human respect is a sure sign of attachment and it destroys virtue. Human respect is a deference we pay to the judgment of others about ourselves. When we become concerned about what other people think of us, it can actually affect us for the worse. It is utterly beyond comprehension how people will refrain from performing some work that is precious to Our Lord merely because of what other people will think of them. How often have you not said something or done something because you knew you would suffer at other people's hands or be ridiculed for it? If you were perfectly detached you wouldn't care what anyone thought of you; you would merely do what was right regardless of what others thought. The Jews went to Christ and noted that He was not a man who respected the opinions of men and by that they meant that He was not concerned with human respect and this is one of the signs of Christ's perfect detachment.

Human respect can also incite us to sin, i.e. when we, out of weakness, give in to the encouragement of others to commit some sin. Those at work and in the family must be careful about this. At school we call it peer pressure. Modern man talks as if children today are under more pressure from their peers to conform. This is true, if

and only if, we cultivate human respect in our children. If a child could care less what other's thought of him, all their incitement is going to be meaningless to him and he'll just shrug it off as the crowd's irrational behavior. But if we allow our children to cultivate this vice, school will be a never-ending occasion of sin. Modern man is no different from the past regarding human respect, the difference is that in the past people's moral convictions were more important to them than social acceptability, but today moral acceptability is everything.

Another category, and perhaps the most important category, of things to which we can be attached is ourselves. When Christ told us that he who saves his life in this world will lose it in the next, He was telling us that if you cannot let go of your life here and now, i.e. if you are attached to your life, you run the danger of losing your soul; it is that simple. Very few, and I mean, very few people ever get to the point where God is more important to them than their selves. Most people are very concerned about themselves, but this concern is manifested in different ways.

For some it is merely a matter of pride: they like to think that they are God's gift to humanity. In other words, they are constantly judging themselves to be good in this way and that while overlooking their imperfections. This attachment to ourselves means that we have desire to see ourselves as good. But this is contrary to the wisdom of the saints which through the ages has dictated that the first step in holiness comes from looking at your imperfection as your work, and the good in you as God's work. You merit nothing except the penalty of your sins and the imperfections that they cause in you. The only thing in you that is truly your work and your work alone is your sin, vice and imperfection. Any good in you whatsoever has God as its first cause, for even He tells us in the Old Testament, "without Me, you can do nothing." Therefore, there is no point for you to rally in your goodness for it is not your glory but God's. Instead you must detach yourself from your false formulations of your goodness and look at your depravity directly and admit to it. It is exceedingly painful, but it is most fruitful. For by detaching yourself from your self which is a created good, you can begin the process of eradicating your imperfections and thereby make more room for God in your heart. Moreover, if you are more consumed with yourself through pride than God then you take up the room in your heart where God properly belongs. This is true hatred of self, i.e. to hate your imperfections and coming to the realization that everything that you have produced on your own in yourself is disordered. True love of self does not love one's depravity which is really the place of pride. True love of self consists in charity and that we shall leave for the last

conference. Nevertheless, we must be willing to surrender to God how we think about ourselves and be detached enough to be willing to accept the ugly truth of our sinfulness. Like the alcoholic who cannot overcome his alcoholism without first admitting he has a problem, so we cannot overcome any sin without first detaching ourselves from the pleasure of thinking well of ourselves and admit our imperfections so that we can move on in the spiritual life.

Another way that we can be attached to ourselves is through what the saints called "the flesh." This means that we are attached to placating our lower nature. This finds itself in forms such as gluttony, sins against purity, etc. But it can also come in things like laziness where we give into our flesh's desire to be at rest all the time. It can come in a fixation on our beauty or some physical attribute we might have. It can come in an attachment to thinking the way we want to think and not letting anyone else tell us what to do. Most often it comes in placating the disordered appetites. But if one is not detached from one's own comfort and pleasure, he will never engage in mortification and thereby never overcome his imperfections. It also finds its manifestation in the aversion to prayer. Our body desires that we spend our time placating it, and pray is not a physical activity which results in the body getting some good from it. Therefore, the body fights it and those who are not detached from the flesh, will never ascend in prayer.

The last category of things to which we become attached are spiritual goods. This category needs some explanations because to the pious it can be a grave impediment to their spiritual advancement. St. John of the Cross often talked about the fact that any spiritual good we receive from God must never become something to which we are attached. In fact, he often says that certain kinds of spiritual goods should be ignored.

Spiritual goods are broken into three types. The first are things exterior to us, like our statues, crosses or any other spiritual item. These things are not meant to be the end of our affections, rather they are to be a means by which we love and show affection to God alone. Therefore, a statue of Christ or of Our Lady must be a means to loving God, not something which we love for its own sake. While we love Our Lady for the sake of God and we love Christ for His own sake, nevertheless, their representation in images, statues, and in other ways must not become the end of our affections because then we as Catholics would truly be idolaters. But we are not:

rather the statue is that which lifts my mind and heart to God or to the saint who helps me to arrive at God.

The next type of spiritual good are the consolations and gifts which come in the normal process of engaging the spiritual life. At times, God will give us great consolations in some work or prayer. But we cannot focus on these consolations because we can become attached to them and they can therefore come between us and God. The charismatic movement is a prime example of what happens when someone becomes attached to some spiritual consolation or gift. The gift is more important than the giver and we end up seeking after that gift unreasonably. All of the saints have always warned that one should never engage in spiritual matters for the sake of some consolation or gift. Rather, the consolation must be used as means to gain closer union with God. Again, this created spiritual good is something which we must use as a means not as an end of spiritual activity. God sends them to us for our spiritual benefit.

Moreover, when one enters into the purgative way, consolations are the first thing God strips of us. Consolations are given to us much like a snack is given to a dog to get him to do a trick. God gives us a spiritual goodie in order to move us closer to Him. But eventually, when we train a dog, we want him to perform the trick without giving him a milk bone dog biscuit and so eventually, we get to the point in our spiritual life where God does not give us consolation but desolations to purify us but also to test us to see if we are engaging in the spiritual life out of love of Him rather than love of the consolation. Eventually, if the person advances in holiness and prayer, God plunges them into a profound desolation to intensify the purification process. In other words, He does it to perfect the detachment the individual has to anything but before He does that, the person must show his willingness to be detached through his own efforts.

Moreover, if one bases one's spiritual life on consolations, then it becomes the standard by which we judge whether God is pleased with us or not as to whether we get some consolation out of it. Moreover, we judge religious activity by whether we get anything out of it. This attachment to the consolations associated with religious or spiritual activities is called spiritual gluttony, because the person "feeds," if you will, on the spiritual goods rather than on God. This is one of the reasons why many reject the Old Mass because it is not designed for spiritual consolations but desolations. In other words, it is designed to strip us of ourselves so that we can enter

into the mystery of God present in the Sacrifice by means of silence, by kneeling and by meditative prayer rather than socializing and external chattering.

If one judges what he does on consolations, he will wrongly judge when desolation comes as a time in which God is not present or being cruel or is angry with the person. Quite the contrary, desolations can be a sign of God's love for the person because God is trying to purify him. This tendency toward spiritual gluttony on the part of man is why St. Theresa of Avila used to say, "God, if this is the way you treat your friends, it is no wonder you have so few of them." The living of a truly catholic life is a life of the grind, it is a life of pain and suffering because it is a life of the love of God which purifies and sanctifies us by means of long periods desolation and suffering. In an age which is not only spiritually but materially gluttonous, it is no wonder why so few lead a truly Catholic life. In the past, the Church discipline regard fasting and abstinence was much more stringent and this was because in the past the members of the Church recognized the need for penance for the sake of avoiding spiritual gluttony. Spiritual gluttony destroys one's ability to love God and do His Will in difficult moments. It is a cause of despair since one's hope is placed in spiritual consolations. Those warm feelings and pleasurable inclinations you receive during prayer must only be used as a means of greater ascendancy to God:

you must never focus on them, because they, not God, then would become the focus of your attention. Detachment from this good is an absolute pre-requisite for ascendancy to God in the spiritual life, unfortunately most never get beyond it.

The last type of spiritual good to which we can be attached is mystical phenomena. Every saint has warned against becoming attached to them. We see this in everything these days. Some become attached to some apparition which does not have Church approval and so when it is declared not to be genuine, the declaration is met with incredulity. Some become so attached to mystical phenomena like miracles, etc., that people seek them for the satisfaction of the reassurance of their faith, but this is spiritual immaturity. Spiritual maturity does not seek after mystical phenomena. St. John of the Cross said to avoid it. If it happens to you, don't think about it or dwell on it; ignore it. If it is from God, it doesn't matter what you do, God's intention regarding it will still come about. But if it is from Satan, ignoring it thwarts his work. But if you dwell on it, it becomes an obstacle to your spiritual life like the other spiritual goods and consolations.

Fr. Jordan Aumann, one of the foremost spiritual theologians of the last three decades, notes in his book *Spiritual Theology* that those who seek after supernatural and mystical phenomena and charismatic graces can come under the influence of the devil. This is for two reasons. The first is that Satan can use these things to get you fixated on them rather than on God. The last thing he wants is for you to be attached to God alone so he is willing to allow you to be attached to a spiritual good as long as he thinks it can come between you and God. Secondly, Satan can often leave us with the impression that something is miraculous or from God when it is actually from him. In other words, he could make us think something is going to happen or is the case since he can affect our imagination. After a while the event may occur because Satan can predict things, not perfectly, but with a great deal of accuracy because of his intelligence and knowledge of things. People often misconstrue this accuracy as a sign of it coming from God and so they begin to believe in dreams and things of this sort which the Church has always condemned. Therefore, if you think supernatural things are happening to you, you are probably ready for the loony bin or you may be being affected by Satan. Therefore avoid it and ignore it. If it is from God, don't worry about it, God can take care of it on His own.

All of these things which we have talked about, i.e. the various things to which we can become attached, can come between us and God and so we must have perfect detachment from every created good. This perfect detachment or Holy Indifference is what St. John of the Cross called "becoming nothing." In other words, we must drain ourselves of everything so that God can become everything in us. We do not strip ourselves of every affection for created things and everything in us that is not of God, then God cannot fully take residence in our souls and hearts. Therefore, unlike the Buddhist conception of becoming nothing for its own sake which is irrational, we become nothing so that can become everything. We must decrease so that He may increase.

Finally, we can look to the Exemplar in this regard. It is often difficult to look to Christ, even though we always should, but it is often difficult for us because we know He is God and His ways seem so inaccessible at times. But there is another who is fully human and who is the perfect exemplar in this regard and that is Mary. I have always marveled at the words Our Lady spoke during the Annunciation, "I am the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to thy word." These words show a great many things, some of which we shall discuss in the next conference, but for now, I would like to focus on these words as a sign of Our Lady's perfect detachment.

These words show that God is everything to her and that she is nothing. For a handmaid is nothing in comparison to her lord, and so Our Lady states that she is nothing and God is everything. Moreover, it shows that she is perfectly detached from herself, knowing that she is to submit to whatever God wants regardless of the cost to her. It is a sign of her complete detachment from human respect, i.e. others insofar as she is willing to be pinned with the stigma of being with child from a Person other than her espoused. She is detached from her family, doing what God wants rather than what her family would want. She is concerned about what God wants and not so much about what St. Joseph or her family will think. She is detached from things insofar as she is taking on a state which will require her to submit her worldly goods, if there be any, to God Who is to be in her womb. This is perfect submission; this is perfect draining of self; this is perfect detachment and this is why Our Lady is the model of perfection and detachment for us. We must become like her and pray to her that she may produce her like in us. Mary, Spiritual Vessel, pray for us.

Socrates used to say "know thyself" and this was necessary for one to overcome one's ignorance as well as to know how to be prudent given one's state in life. He also used to say that an unexamined life is not worth living and this is primarily because people will get caught up in trivialities and will fail to come to self knowledge and never advance in that knowledge. While this was said by a pagan, it can be applied to a Christian. Catholicism is the religion of self-reflection and self-knowledge and the very fact that the Church exhorts us to go to confession regularly is a sign that the Church wants us thinking about ourselves. Thinking about ourselves is not done for the sake of selfishness where we try to appropriate things for ourselves alone. Rather it is meant to reflect seriously on our imperfections and unholiness as a form of encouragement to strive for holiness and the eradication of imperfections in our lives.

Self knowledge begins with humility insofar as pride blinds us in our judgement about ourselves and so if one is proud he will never really come to understand what his real problems are. Humility, on the other hand, disposes us to be willing to admit to ourselves our imperfections and this is, again, why the Sacrament of Penance is so salutary because it is the sacrament of humiliation insofar as we must humble ourselves and admit before God and man our imperfections and sins. Humility helps us to be willing to live in accordance with the truth and not to judge ourselves greater than we are and so we are able to look at ourselves squarely to see what really needs to be overcome in our lives.

Self-knowledge comes in many ways and it should never discourage us as to how it comes and to what we discover. If we find out that we have a serious problem with a sin, we should rejoice, not in the sin but in the fact that we have discovered a problem and can now work on it. For the person who longs to be holy, being spiritual tepid is a suffering and sometimes we suffer a long time because we never really come to understand what our problems are which are impeding our spiritual progress. Most people flee self-knowledge because it can be a tremendous suffering and sorrow to come to the realization of how disordered and sinful we are. But if we do not take a serious look at ourselves, we will never know what medicine to take to overcome our difficulties.

Coming to true self-knowledge is very difficult, however, because we are easily deluded by the noxious potion of the good of self. In other words, it is too easy for us to take delight in ourselves and as a result think we are wonderful. Christ Himself indicated that for us in the state of Original Sin, knowledge of self is very difficult because we are so spiritually blind. For instance, He made the observation that we must take the plank out of our own eye before removing the speck in our neighbors. The point is that we are blind to our own vice and sin because of the plank in our spiritual eye. The problem is, if we are blind how can we see the plank? How are we to really arrive at a knowledge of our imperfections which is honest, sincere, humble and true? There are several sources that we can take and each has their place. They are divided in three, the first is others, the second is our selves the last one is God. It would behoove us to take a little time and reflect upon these three sources since they can provide a great deal of knowledge about ourselves.

As mentioned the first source is others. Sometimes people will tell us our defects outright, e.g. sometimes you will hear some child about 4 years old in a supermarket tell his mom that the man at the end of the aisle stinks. Children are great for pointing out our imperfections because they have no inhibitions about telling us. Adults will sometimes tell us, but adults are more subtle, they usually do it in other ways, like by giving us the silent treatment or ignoring us or avoiding us. One of the ways we can detect our imperfections is to see people's reactions to the things which we do. Most people walk around talking and acting for its own sake without any sensitivity on how other people react to us. Sometimes their reaction can actually tell us that we have virtue, e.g. if someone who is pro-abortion reacts against us that is good. But if someone you know is holy and who reacts to something you do, it can indicate that perhaps you need to look at what you are doing and examine it to see if there is

anything wrong in what you are doing. If people tell us a defect outright, most people affected by Original Sin react saying that the person is rude and out of line, rather than using it as an opportunity to seriously consider whether they have the defect. This is why one must be willing to be humiliated because if you are, you don't react in a negative fashion when people tell you that you have a defect. While it is true that sometimes people are not truthful, nevertheless, one should consider the issue. We must, of course, not go around blaming ourselves for things that aren't true but we should be willing to blame ourselves for things that are.

We can know a lot about ourselves by how we treat other people. We also know a great deal about ourselves in that we perceive through our senses that we are different from other people and things. In the Old Testament, God developed Adam's knowledge of self by bringing different animals to him to name so that he could recognize the differences between himself and animals. Modern man is not doing so well in this area and that is because modern man is not self-reflective in the right ways. When we see defects in other people, we can use those as moments of self-examination to see if we might be guilty of that problem. My experience is that people who recognize the defect someone has is usually guilty of that defect. We often find it amusing how two people cannot stand each other because they are exactly alike in their defects.

Another very good way to come to knowledge of ourselves is to choose a spiritual director and place ourselves under his guidance. If we confess and discuss regularly our spiritual lives with a spiritual director, he can often begin to detect patterns of sinfulness and trace them back to imperfections. Like a doctor, he can examine the wound and tell you which medicine to take in order to overcome the sin and to purify ourselves. But a warning must come with this advice:

do not choose a director unless you are completely willing to reveal your soul to the director. You must be absolutely honest with him and hide nothing because if you do, like a patient who will not reveal the wound to the doctor, the doctor cannot heal that patient so if a spiritual director is not shown the soul of his directee, he will not be able to know exactly how to help him. Choosing a spiritual director can be scary because it means that it is time to come to a reckoning with ourselves and our imperfections. Knowing the deepest inner recesses of our soul is a harrowing thought because we may find all sorts of things there which will be very painful indeed.

The second source of self-knowledge is ourselves. Perhaps the most direct way for us to know ourselves is through our own conscience. The conscience is not a separate faculty from the intellect, rather it refers to an act of the intellect in which we judge the sinfulness of our past actions. In effect the conscience does three things:

- 1) it tells us if something we have done in the past is wrong;
- 2) it tells us if the current action or some action in the future is good or bad and
- 3) it nags us, i.e. it agitates us so that we will be moved to sorrow and try to overcome our sin. In Scripture, the conscience is often referred to as a worm which eats away at us and in hell it never stops eating away at the person. The sting of the conscience can often drive people to justify their sin and if you ever find yourself trying to justify your sin, you need to stop, clear your head and think about what you are really doing.

The conscience is very important because it will not let us rest until we appropriate our sin and imperfections. What I mean by that is that when we discover a sin or imperfection from whatever source, be it ourselves, others or God, we must own up to it:

we must accept the fact that we are that way. Like the alcoholic who denies he has a problem and therefore does nothing about his alcoholism, we must own up to and accept the fact that we have imperfections and sins on our souls if we are ever going to be able to do anything about them. Denying them, running away from them, justifying them are signs that we have not accepted that our sin is our own and that we must admit to ourselves that we have this problem and thereby be able to address it directly so that we can get rid of it.

This is why we must develop a sensitive conscience. A sensitive conscience is one which is disposed toward judging rightly about the goodness and badness of our actions without being affected by other things. In other words, a sensitive conscience is a conscience which keeps a vigilance so that we will never engage in action contrary to God's Laws. It does not come under the sway of appetite or human respect but seeks to know what is truly right and wrong. Therefore, it will seek to form itself according to the teachings of the Church and judge its actions according to those teachings. It will not make excuses for sin and seek to justify them. It will accept the gravity of sinfulness of an action without trying to minimize its gravity. It will not be a lax conscience letting oneself off the hook at every turn. Nor will it be a scrupulous conscience which finds sin where there isn't any. Scrupulosity is really self-filled

pride even though it disguises itself as humble. In other words, the person who is scrupulous is attached to their judging themselves and things as sinful. Some people actually get a pleasure in mulling over their sin and the possibility of sins in simulations. So as a result, they get hung up on certain things because they want to, even though they have deluded themselves into thinking that they do not. One of the signs of a scrupulous person is if they judge something but cannot let it go but have to keep thinking about it. This is not a sensitive conscience. While a sensitive conscience will tell you that you have done something wrong and bother you as a result of it, it does not become fixated on considering the sin and it does not take delight in finding sin in itself which scrupulosity does.

Since the conscience tells us about the goodness of actions and if we are good or bad for doing them, we can come to know a great deal about ourselves by looking at the types of things that we do. If we lash out at people, it is a sign that we suffer anger. If lie, we are a liar; if we talk too much, we are a gossip. Our actions reveal our character with all its defects and imperfections as well as perfections. Christ Himself said "the lips speak the inner recesses of heart" which means that when we talk or do something, we are revealing what is important to us, the defects we have, as well as the good aspects.

But focusing on the good parts of ourselves can be dangerous because it can lead to pride. While we have to have proper self-esteem, we must not mistake that for pride. True self-esteem recognizing that one is a child of God possessing an immortal and, therefore, invaluable soul which must be treated according to the precepts of God. It does not go around glorying in itself but recognizes that it is something good because it reflects the majesty of God.

At any rate, we can learn a great deal about our spiritual life by our actions. If we do not like to pray or if we find prayer arduous and distracted, it is because there is a defect of laziness in our souls or a defect of being interested in things other than God. If we honestly found God the most interesting thing to possible think about it, prayer would be easy, but most of us really are more interested in worldly things. We can reveal our intellectual ignorance by the way we talk and what we do. We can reveal to ourselves just how blind or stupid we are by the dumb things we end up doing or saying. We can know how much wisdom we have by how well we act or how poorly we act. We can learn about our virtues such as temperance by how much we eat, how important food is to us, how much we are willing to fast and abstain. Any action we

perform reveals something about ourselves and if it is a moral action of any kind, it can reveal our virtues and defects if we look seriously at what we do.

Another aspect of ourselves is how we react to people, things and God. How we react to things can reveal how lowly we are. If we have attachments to things and something happens to them we often become enraged or sorrowed. Our attachments can be known simply by a reflection on the loss of that thing and whether it would bother us. If we have attachments, it means we are suffering from concupiscence with respect to that thing. Sometimes our reactions to things can reveal our mentality or attitude about them and therefore can tell us how important they are to us. If we did not have a single attachment to anything created, we would have perfect equanimity regarding the thing. If you do not have that, then you have a defect that must be overcome. If we get irritated with things that don't work well, or when we are working if something doesn't go well, if we react to that then you may be suffering from impatience or lack the virtue of long suffering. If we treat other people's things poorly, it is a sign that we do not have a sense of justice. If you desire to possess any thing created without it being somehow referred back to God, it means that you, again, suffering from concupiscence. The pleasure and negative feelings we may have about things can tell us how defective our relationship is to them. If every created thing is not somehow referred back to God in our eyes, then we suffer attachments and defects regarding them.

One's reaction to people can speak volumes about their virtues and vices. If one has an attachment to someone, that can stem from some sort of concupiscence, which is not just with the Sixth Commandment but any subservience of someone to ourselves. When we consider our attachment to someone we ought to consider whether it is because we are really attached to God Who wants us to fulfill our obligations regarding this person, or is it because of some created benefit we derive from it. Who we associate with, who we find enjoyable to be around, who we find it difficult to be around can reveal to us some defect corresponding to the "why" in each one of those cases. If you hate being around someone, perhaps it is because their defects touch upon your defects causing your emotions to react. If you like being around someone, is it because of their virtue or because of the fact that you have some vice in common that you like to engage in, e.g. do you like being around people who like to gossip or detract against other people?

Another important aspect of people is how we react to their treatment of us or our things. If someone treats you poorly, do you act with charity or do you react with

anger? If you get angry because of some injustice toward you, then you have the vice of irascibility and you do not have the virtue of meekness. This is different from righteous indignation which rejects the injustice not for one's own sake but because of the injustice itself. In other words, if someone does something that is sinful or wrong to you or something or someone else, if you are indignant because of the evil, that can be a virtue. But if you react because it was done to you, that is a sign of vice.

Angry reactions are not the only type of reactions we can have to people. There are those reactions we have to people who butter us up:

do you like being around someone who flatters you or says nice things about you? If so why? Is it because of some virtue they have or because you take delight in their saying good things about you? Do you avoid people's company because they don't say good things about you? Do you like being around people because of some good thing you get from them, i.e. you get something from them which does not in some way refer you back to God? For instance, you like someone's company because they are funny and not because they might make you holy? Do you avoid people who will make you holy? Becoming holy is a painful and arduous task, are you willing to suffer someone who makes you holier? Moreover, the very fact that you suffer shows what your defects are.

Do you react when someone teaches you something which is good for you even though it may be painful? Do you react to other people's holiness? In other words, are you envious about other people's spiritual and intellectual gifts? This is a form of spiritual envy in that we would prefer that we have a spiritual gift rather than someone else. Are you spiritually jealous, i.e. do you have a spiritual gift or intellectual gift that you don't want other people to have because somehow you might not be as important or special in your eyes? Do you look down on people because they may not be as spiritually minded or as holy as you judge yourself to be? This reveals to you that you think it is your place to judge the interior life of other people which is proper to God alone. Do you make rash judgments about the sinful state of someone from the actions they perform? This too reveals to you that you lack humility. Are you willing to accept the fact that someone you cannot stand might end up having a higher place in heaven than you? Spiritual envy and jealousy are dangerous things. Is your judgment of yourself always humble in comparison to other people, i.e. when you look at other people's poverty or depravity or stupidity, do you even think to yourself that could be you if it was not for God? In other words, does viewing the defects of others move you to humility and fear of God or does it move you to pride and

arrogance? All of your reactions to other people reveal to you what is deep inside. While we cannot know or see the inner recesses of our souls, God reveals to us all the time what is there by the actions which flow from the virtue or that filth which is in your soul.

Another area we can come to knowledge of ourselves is how we react to God. For instance, if we judge that God wants us to do something, i.e. if we judge that God is calling us to some heroic act, and we shy away from it can be a sign of pusillanimity, i.e. littleness of soul. Do we give in to His demands and then complain about them constantly which is another sign of pusillanimity. Are we like the man who puts his hands to the plow and constantly looks back at the goods which God has asked us to give up in order to do his will? This is a particular danger of priests or married people. Some men entertain the idea that they should have married Bessy rather than their current wife which is a sign that one suffers from the defect of lack of resignation to the Divine Will in the circumstances in life. Do priests or religious think of the joys of marriage and how they are missing out or do they look at others with a desire to be with them which is a sign that they have not resigned themselves fully to God's calling.

Do we accept all of the sufferings and trials with total surrender to trust in God or do we walk around griping and complaining and murmuring against God's Providence? Have you ever asked yourself or others a question like "why does God give X all that money?" It doesn't have to be money, it can be any number of things, such as intellectual, spiritual and worldly gifts. If so, you are in fact, questioning God and in so doing you are revealing to yourself your lack of trust in God's capacity to really know what He is doing regarding His own creation.

Do you tend to engage the spiritual life because of the gifts that God gives you? We have already talked about spiritual gluttony, but if you sit around taking delight in God's gifts rather than turning from them and using them to move you to God, then it is a sign of your spiritual gluttony. Do you lead a moral life in your family because of the benefits you and your family get from it or do you do it purely because it is what God would have you do? If you do anything in the spiritual or moral life other than the love of God, you subordinate God to yourself and in that you have revealed Satan's tracks in your soul. Everything you do, everything you say, every reaction you have, every motion of the intellect, will and appetites reveals the inner recesses of your heart.

The last source of self-knowledge is from God. In addition to how we take His consolations, there is the issue of His desolations. How do you accept the times and events in life which leave you in spiritual dryness? If God sends you a suffering, do you embrace it like Our Lord embraced the Cross or do you fight it, griping about His providential plan. Do the desolations disturb your confidence in God? Do you foster the virtue of hope enough to be able to endure the spiritual desert that God leads one through in the ascent to holiness? How you react to these things tells you what your relationship is like with Him. Do you pray only when you feel like it, or when there is some difficulty or do you pray purely because you love Him? If you do not pray purely because you love Him, then your heart is not pure. Examining our intentions behind why we pray can often tell us what is really in our hearts. When God sends you promptings of grace to do the right thing, do you ever turn down those graces? When life is difficult and you sense God's grace, do you accept and cooperate with it or do you turn it down and lose those moments when He is asking you to ascend the spiritual ladder?

Lastly, we can always ask God directly to reveal ourselves to us so that we can come to a knowledge of our hidden faults and failings. This is, indeed, a very scary way of proceeding. While I have found it to be the most efficacious and fruitful, it is also the hardest and most painful. When we ask God to reveal ourselves to us so that we can begin the work of overcoming our faults, He does it in one of two ways. The first is through other people or events. This occurs when something happens or someone says something or even when we do something and like a flash of lightning He will move our intellect to see the fault. This is why asking for humility is dangerous:

God tends to give us what we want if it is in our spiritual best interest, so be careful not to ask for something that you really don't want. But if you don't want it, that itself is a sign of your spiritual tepidity. But when you ask for Him to show you who you are, you must be willing to accept the way He decides to tell you. Sometimes it comes, as I mentioned, through other people or event or things but sometimes He will wait for the right moment and like a light switched turned on, He will point out to us what our imperfections are. This type of showing us our problems can be terrifying because it cuts deep into our soul and understanding of ourselves. It is a most blessed form of divine correction, but it can bring with it tremendous pain and sorrow with recognition of a profound evil deep in our souls and hearts.

While it may be frightful, I cannot exhort you enough to pursue God's knowledge of yourself. When you die and stand before God, your judgment will consist in precisely

this, i.e. God will show you who and what you are. We can get small amounts of that here by asking God to show us how He sees us and in so doing, we ask for the opportunity to be made aware of our problems so that we can do away with them so that He will be pleased with us. Before you go to Confession and when you do your examination of conscience at night, beg God for this knowledge of yourself so that you may make amends to Him Who is so good. As St. Paul says, act manly or courageously by embracing spiritual fortitude so that when God reveals your soul to you, you are able to accept with courage and have hope in God Who desires not the death of sinners, but that you may be made just in His eyes.

Lastly, we can ask Our Lady for this knowledge as well. For she who is the Mediatrix of All Grace, can send the grace necessary for us to see our sinfulness and imperfections. We can also take heart in knowing that we have Our Lady as a model of perfect self knowledge. Among the three sources, we see that through others she came to know more about herself. When the Angel appeared to her and told her that she was full of grace, he revealed to her at the behest of God the state of her soul. While not revealing any imperfection, for there were none, rather He revealed her soul's profound spiritual beauty. When St. Elizabeth heard Our Lady, St. John was sanctified in her womb and she declares, "who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me." Elizabeth being moved by the Holy Ghost declares Our Lady's role as Mother of God. When we live according to a life of perfection and strive for holiness, Our Lord will show us who we are, but if we chose darkness and sin, our own blindness from sin will always hide the depth of our evil from ourselves.

Our Lady herself through her action discloses her self knowledge. She declares that she is the handmaid of the Lord and by doing so declares that she knows her place before God and that He can have whatever He wants regarding her, for she is His handmaid. She reveals the depth and beauty of her soul in the Magnificat noting how her soul magnifies God's glory, omnipotence and every other virtue and attribute. She is lowly, but in her lowliness she has been exalted.

While we should not be advised to think too much upon our virtues, Mary who is perfect is able to do it in perfect humility. For she is able to look at her perfections and see God alone because she has no pride or selfishness. We cannot dwell on our perfections or attributes because we would fall in love with ourselves in our blindness not being fully able to recognize that every perfection we have is the manifestation of God Himself in creation. Because Mary is able to look at what is good in her and see God alone, she is our example. When we look at ourselves, we should see the

good in us as coming from God and the evil in ourselves as coming from us. This is the practice the saints engaged in to ensure a motivation for atonement for sin, a motivation to overcome imperfection and for humility. It is not clear from Tradition or Scripture where Mary had intimations from God about her perfections other than those which she herself mentions and which God tells her of by means of an angel and men. Nevertheless, her constant prayer to God can be an example to us to depend on God for everything as well as for our self knowledge.

When you think about your imperfections and sins or when you ask Our Lord and Our Lady for help or when you try to develop a sensitive conscious, always take courage and hope in the fact that God is trying to perfect you. Do not be overcome with sorrow or despair when He reveals to you the inner recesses of your soul, but rejoice that God is giving you a gift which He does not give to many people. Finally, be sure to pray to Our Lady that she may send you the grace which is necessary to make a holy response to the knowledge you gain of yourself. Mary, Refuge of Sinners, pray for us.

Many times in the past, you have heard me speak of the nature of charity. Charity is the supernatural virtue which resides in our wills by which we love God. Our Lord when He was on earth gave us two precepts by which we act according to the supernatural virtue. We have heard these two precepts many times but it is always good to hear it again (Matt. 22:37ff):

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and with thy whole soul and with thy whole mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. And the second is like to this:

Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

Having just heard the two precepts, I would like to ask the following questions, how can I love God with my whole heart if I am also supposed to love my neighbor as myself? If I am loving my neighbor and myself, are they not taking place up in my heart for God whom I am supposed to love totally. It is an apparent contradiction and the only way to avoid this contradiction is if we understand the second precept in a specific way. In other words, I can only love my neighbor and myself and still love God totally, if and only if, I love my neighbor for the sake of God alone. One cannot love God completely if you love your neighbor for his or your own sake but only insofar as you see loving your neighbor as really loving the image of God which can be seen in your neighbor.

This activity is most godlike because it is what God does. Most people find it a bit scandalous when they hear the fact that God really only loves Himself and is only interested in Himself. Anything that is not Him or like Him, He hates and is not interested in it. God loves us because we are like Him; He loves His creation because it is a mirror of His perfections and goodness. When He commanded us to love our neighbor as yourself, He was in fact commanding us to love the things the way He loves them. Why do you think Mother Theresa was able to work with the poorest of the poor? It is because they too are in the image of God. One time when she was picking up someone who was homeless in the streets of Calcutta, the person asked her, why are you doing this? The question is a normal question:

why would anyone want to work among the poorest of the poor, many of them who are filthy, suffering from rotten flesh and every kind of disease? Why would anyone want to work with AIDS patients? Some work with AIDS patients for disordered reasons, but she was not and her nuns are not disordered. Her answer was, "because I love you." Even the ugliest, grossest, filthiest, disease ridden individual is worthy of a profound love when we see that they are in God's image. We do not love them because they are ugly, gross, filthy and disease ridden, we love them because they are in the Image of God.

It is only through charity that one is able to truly love one's enemy. St. Thomas Aquinas tells us that we do not love our enemy insofar as he is an enemy, for that is contrary to the nature of reason. No, we love our enemy because regardless of how evil our enemy is, he is in the image of God. While we are not to love the damned, in fact, we are to hate them, we are to love our enemies in this life because they have the possibility of being saved. How would you feel if someone you hated in this life later converted and became a friend of God and God loved that person more than you. Then at the Final Judgment, you would have to stand shame-facedly in the presence of God and admit that you hated someone who is dear to Him. Moreover, you would have to face someone who could, by the mercy of God, actually have a higher place in heaven than you.

Loving your enemy is actually, again, very godlike. For the Church formally teaches that God loves all of those in Heaven, in Purgatory and on earth, but His love does not extend to the damned. But many on earth are in the state of moral sin, but He still loves them. We know from our instruction from the Baltimore Catechism that when we commit a mortal sin we become an enemy of God. Imagine that, an enemy of God! You could be God's enemy if He had not chosen to give you grace. But God

loves them, even though they are His enemies. An enemy is one which works against you and an enemy of God works against the Kingdom, or as St. Augustine puts it, the City of God. Yet, God loves them because they are in His Image. God wants us to be like Him and so He commanded us to love our enemies so that we could be like Him. Naturally speaking, we do not love our enemies and one of the signs of someone who is not in the state of grace and who does not live according to the love of God is that they hate their enemies. But someone who has charity is able to love their neighbor for the sake of God and in that he is most godlike.

Charity is not sentimental; it is not the warm fuzzy feelings we get when we do something good. It is not being nice, in fact sometimes charity, i.e. the love of God, requires us to be firm, just and sometimes even harsh. Charity is not a natural love but a supernatural love and it is in this context that we see how we are to love ourselves and our neighbors. Sanctified perfection consist in loving God completely and anything that comes in the way between ourselves and God is damaging our spiritual life. This is why it was said that if you love your spouse with a natural love, it is impeding your spiritual progress.

Love of neighbor encompasses two categories of neighbor, viz.

- 1) friends and family and
- 2) all others.

Natural love normally does not extend to those outside our family and friends but the supernatural love of charity residing in our wills can extend to anyone because every human being is in the Image of God. It is the perfect building block of society in that those who act out of charity will always do what is best for his neighbor. Even though one may not derive any benefit from it himself, he does what is best for individual and nation because he loves them with the love of God.

We should love our friends for no other reason than for the sake of God. Finally, we should love the members of our family for the sake of God alone. Some will ask, if I love my family with the same love I do for my neighbor, how am I to fulfill my commitments to my family over my neighbor. St. Thomas teaches us that moral obligations are based upon our proximity to our neighbor. In other words, my first obligation, if I am a parent, is to my children since they are closest to me, materially speaking. Therefore, if one is acting out of charity, he will be moved to fulfill his obligations to those closest to him because it is what God wants.

It is here, before we continue, that an observation should be made. If we love someone merely out of a natural love, at times we will find fulfilling our obligations to them difficult and we will even neglect them from time to time. I am sure parents can tell of stories when they did not want to get up to feed the child or they might have neglected some obligation to their spouse because they were tired, lazy or resentful or something of this sort. But the supernatural love of charity loves God first and therefore does not care about oneself except the obligation we have to God concerning ourselves. Therefore, charity is the basis for the perfect fulfillment of our obligations to God by means of our family. One will change the child's diapers because that is what God would have him do. One will clean the house, make dinner, go to work, because one loves God so much that he will do it purely because God wants it. When we love someone we seek to please them, and those who love God which is only possible through charity, seek to please Him by fulfilling their daily duties.

The natural love spouses have for each other is very often complicated. But with the supernatural virtue of charity as the basis of their marriage, they will fulfill every aspect of the marriage contract which is required of them. When it comes to conjugal relations, it will be governed by the love of God and the desire to fulfill His precepts regarding it and so married couples will avoid all sorts of sins. Moreover, it helps the married couple not to use conjugal relations as a form of manipulation of each other, for one will not manipulate someone who he is loving for the sake of God:

they are mutually incompatible. Men will not abuse their wives nor impose on them unreasonably about the frequency of conjugal relations. Women, and I can testify to this from having sat in the confessional for some time now, will be generous when it comes to fulfilling the marital duty regarding conjugal relations. Many times, priests hear of married men committing self abuse because of the unreasonable refusal on the side of wife to render the marital obligations. We will speak of this more during the catechism class, but we must be very clear that when you marry, you exchange rights over each other's body, and for a woman, or man for that matter, not to render the marital obligation in this regard can be a sin against marriage. While it may have been fun in the beginning and not so much now, that does not give anyone license not to render their marital obligation. Any reasonable request on the side of the spouse must be rendered as an act of justice toward the spouse who has bodily rights and as fulfillment of the moral obligations to God through the marriage. Love of God will move someone to render their marital obligations in order to make God happy.

Ironically in a Jansenistic age when conjugal relations are viewed as dirty and evil, we can still see that if they are done for the love of God they can actually bring grace.

Moreover, if one loves one spouse because of one's total love for God, then the relationship will be peaceful and joyful, but to the degree that charity is wanting, that relation stands in jeopardy of being strained, put upon and finally ended. Human beings, as good as they are, do not fulfill our wills and so we can grow tired of them, even grow to hate them. But love of God never grows tired and if the spouses love each other for the sake of God, they will never grow tired of the marriage but find it constant source of joy. Children with respect to their parents and with each other must also be motivated purely by the love of God alone. Imagine if every child acted out of the love of God how different baby sitting and child rearing would be! It is far too easy for children, and spouses for that matter, to develop a self love if they do not love their family for God alone.

The last category of things which we must love for the sake of God is ourselves. If we love ourselves only because we are God's image, then imagine how different our actions would be. We would have no attachments. We would do everything we can to grow in holiness to increase sanctifying grace in our souls which is the indwelling of the Holy Ghost. We would eradicate every imperfection. We would develop a constant prayer life always trying to be with the Beloved. We would strive for virtue in order to adorn ourselves so as to allure Our Lord into a more intimate relationship with us. Like the bride who bedecks herself with beautiful jewelry and cloths in order to please her husband and to draw him to her, so through virtues do we bedeck our souls with beautiful things in order to please God. This means that we will never act out of selfishness which displeases our Beloved. We will always esteem our souls as something loved and valued, not for our own sakes, but for God alone.

Charity is the perfection of all virtues. It is the foundation of sanctifying grace. It is the perfect building block of society and of our families. It is the virtue which maintains our union with God, our Beloved. It is in this context that we must view Our Lady. People want to paint her as ordinary, but her life could be anything but ordinary considering her tremendous grace and her perfect charity. She never once said a harsh thing to Joseph or Jesus because of her total love of God. She never once sinned because she had an intense hatred for that which displeased her Spouse, the Holy Ghost. Her love of self was completely a love of God and her love of neighbor likewise so. She is the exemplar of the fulfillment of the two precepts of charity to love God totally and to love neighbor as ourselves for the sake of God. It is for this

reason that God gave her the role of Mediatrix of All Graces, for God gave them to her knowing full well that her desire would be to shower them on mankind so that the rest of men might become like her spouse. She earnestly desires that all of us would be in her Spouse's Image, and for that reason she tenderly and with a motherly hand gives graces to those whom God would have her give. Finding the favor of Our Lady is blessing indeed.

Mary, Mediatrix of All Graces, pray for us. Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.

The End.