

1997

Grace state: A Christian devotional for College Students

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Grace State

A Christian Devotional for College Students

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1 May 1997

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Chapter One: Silence

As college students, we sometimes live our lives in a rush. Deadlines, dates and appointments keep us running through and out of time. Stop. If just for a moment, stop what you're doing (you're busy reading this book) and take a moment or two for peace and solitude. Start now.

O.K., we're back. Wasn't that refreshing? I wish I had learned how to do that a lot earlier in my college career. A state of silence is where I first began to really develop a friendship with God. Before I began to take advantage of true silence, I was constantly running all day, but I was running on empty. I could wake up in the morning and look at myself in the mirror, seeing a blank sheet of paper just waiting to be written on by the events of the day. But although I may have spent the day accomplishing many tasks and doing grand things for myself and others, I would come back to that mirror at the end of the day and still see a blank sheet of paper. Nothing had been written on it. Without silence to reflect on my experiences at some time during the day, I learned nothing. I wasn't growing, and the book of my life was largely filled with empty pages.

When our Heavenly Father leads us to prayer, He is the gentle parent guiding us to rest our minds, and we are the rambunctious, nervous children fighting off sleep, yearning to continue our play and have a little

more entertainment before the lights go out. Silence is the comforter that brings us closer to God. And God's presence in the silence that surrounds us and is within ourselves is calming, it rarely makes us anxious or uptight. Sometimes what God has to say to us in that silence can make us anxious, and that's not bad if we are in need of change or conversion. But reaching a high level of awareness of God's grace within us is generally calming; the uneasy feelings before God result from our not wanting to let go of the control that we have over our thoughts, emotions, and actions. Bhagavad Gita says that "meditation is the steady flame of a lamp sheltered in a windless place." Indeed, we are a steady flame when we place ourselves in the windless, quiet presence of God. We burn more steadily, our fire is untouched by unseen tempests, and our flame becomes stronger so that when our candle is moved to a windy place, it does not get snuffed out.

I believe that the first step college students need to take if we want to deepen our spirituality is to take time-out for God every day. We need to have a balance in our daily lives of all things (exercise, prayer, study, socializing, rest, etc.) but I would hazard to guess that one where many of us fall short is prayer. Jesus explains to us clearly how we should pray: "when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father in secret will repay you. In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of

their many words. Do not be like them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (Matthew 6: 6-8).

So, what does “going into our inner room” and “locking the door behind us” mean? It’s more than just getting away from people and external noises. It means making the effort to plunge into the silent presence of God that exists in all of us. This is where we can talk to our Father in secret. We need not tell our secrets for God’s benefit, since God “knows what we need before we ask,” but we journey into our own inner selves for our sake, to learn more about who we are before God. Also, we are not to “babble”: that is, we need to clear our minds of the noise of our own thoughts. Our own thoughts possess our minds, and sometimes even when we try to pray, we *think* too much about it. I’ve often found myself beginning a time of prayer with good intentions, but gradually losing focus until I end up thinking about something completely different. So, even silent “prayer” can be counterproductive if we let our thoughts “babble” too much and we don’t clear our minds. This isn’t easy, and I’ve included some options for meditations and mantras at the end of this chapter that have worked well for me.

Beyond this initial journey into silence, there are probably as many different spiritual paths as there are people. But all these paths must begin, at some point, with quiet contemplation, silent searching. Our lives are not silent, and so we must step out of them from time to time. As college

students, we're famous for being able to do twenty things at once, and "studying" is usually the thing that we *say* we are doing (while we're also talking on the phone, watching TV, or listening to the music that we're using to drown out the music next door.) True, our lives should be a living prayer, but a life that glorifies God finds its strength in the daily hour of silent prayer. Quiet meditation is to the day as a retreat is to the year. We can't be doing anything else if we really want to treasure silence (unless, perhaps, we are listening to calming sounds of God's creation that surround us in natural settings). I treasure this type of silence as the most therapeutic of all, and so it's often difficult for me at college, because I have few opportunities to take advantage of this type of silence. At times I can duplicate this silence by taking a walk on campus, but usually it's difficult to find a quiet place. As I've been become less dependent on nature walks or walks out into a cornfield as my sources of solitude, I've discovered that silence is not a place, but a state of mind. So, I can be in perfect silence even when I'm at the student union and there are dozens of people around me. In fact, if I am going to be studying in a busy place like the union, I need to take specific time for silent reflection before I start. When I do this, it helps me focus better when I start studying and sharpen my recognition of Christ's presence in my surroundings. Over the past couple years, I have come to more fully appreciate the value of silence.

The following is a short essay that I wrote just last year that conveys some of my basic feelings about silence.

Silence

Silence is my mainstay. It is at the base of my Faith, because it is where I most often find God. It is thinking and praying. It is at the top of my list of things to do for the day and it helps me fall asleep at night. It can be my favorite past-time, and it may take up a lot of my time or just a little slice. Quiet is everywhere in daily life. While some may hear our world as a prison of noises, like a room with an incessantly ringing phone that no one can answer, I try to cherish the peace that stretches between the rings. To truly appreciate silence, however, I need to not only clear noise from my surroundings, but also remove the loud thoughts from my mind. Treasuring silence is rewarding for me, but it hasn't always been easy. I've often taken the gift of silence for granted.

In the past, I have been oblivious to the value of silence. I once suffered through an eight-hour train ride in France in a small, packed train. I did not speak any French, so even though I was surrounded by people, I felt absolutely alone. The train was teeming with the French language, but it seemed to be completely mute, with me as the quietest member. But in

fact, I was the *loudest* person there. I was screaming at the top of my brain impulses with fear and distress; all I wanted to do was remove myself from the situation and get off that train. The woman sitting next to me had a beautiful baby in her lap, and I couldn't even chat with her about her child. All I could do was offer a silly, dumb smile.

At the moment, I felt like I had a bit in my mouth, and this aggravated me, because I am normally a very sociable person. This forced silence was like a death march for me--everything that I wanted to say was going with me to the grave. But now, when I look back on that day, I regret that I was too preoccupied with the lack of verbal intercourse to enjoy the virtue of silence. Now, I try to cherish all the quiet that I can by drowning out all the insignificant sounds. It's more difficult here in the States, because there's always someone I could talk to or something that I could be doing. But even if it's just a few minutes while I'm walking to class, or a short study break, I find peace in daily silence.

Just recently, after spending some stressful time studying in the students' union at my university late at night, I started to shuffle home and I was blown away by the calm that was flowing through the trees. There was no one around, so I just closed my eyes and threw my stress to the wind. When solitude and silence are mixed, they can spark exciting spiritual

feelings. But I've found that I can also receive comfort from group silence, especially if the group has a common prayer purpose. When I am one of about nine or ten people in a church praying, I can enjoy complete tranquillity and know that I'm surrounded by people who are also savoring the quiet. When I take part in silent, collective prayer, I share a collective conscience with all the people present, and the resulting experience is greater than the sum of all those people's prayers.

From silence I have learned to be still. I have also found that I don't need to go out looking for silence, I just need to be open to it and it will find me . . . anywhere. In one sense, it is the backdrop of the world on which are hung the noises that human beings create. And if I can just look beyond those noises, especially the ones that echo in my own brain, I can find peace in the calm of natural sounds. In my opinion, there are no annoying natural sounds; even the pervasive buzzing of a bee is preferable to many, although not all, human noises. I think that the secret to enjoying silence is not trying to eliminate all sounds (that may be impossible) but being open to the huge, overarching natural silence that we sometimes do not hear. Lost in this silence, I have often been filled with the peace and calm of God.

The following seven short meditations are designed to help you develop an appreciation for silence and solitude each day of your life. They are inspired in part by an article entitled “An Invitation to Prayer: A guide to deepening our prayer life,” by Father Edward Hays. Although they are labeled by the days of the week, don’t feel bound by this schedule or the given format of these meditations. Take these ideas and fly with them! Experience the beauty of freely-discovered silence. Use these meditations only insofar as they help you come “face-to-face” with God; if they become irrelevant or stale, explore your own methods of meditation and write your own chapter on silence! That’s the whole idea.

Sunday: Try something new. Go to your worship services a half-hour or an hour early and quiet yourself in the church before anyone else arrives. First, read Psalms 42-43, “Longing for God’s Presence in the Temple”. Reflect on these psalms, and then quiet your thoughts to begin prayer. Church pews are the perfect place for people who are beginning meditation, because it’s moderately difficult to fall asleep in them. As always, begin by sitting with your spine erect, with a comfortable posture and your arms resting on your legs. Become conscious of your breath, the blood coursing through your veins, and your gradually slowing heart rate. Focus your eyes on something: a cross, picture, stained-glass window, lectern, flower, ladybug, candle flame, or whatever you can find in the

church. Begin to think about your breathing, and what each breath means to you. Praise God for each breath that you take in, and imagine that as you breathe in you are taking in the Holy Spirit, and as you breathe out you are releasing from your soul all the hurt, all the worries, all the stress in your life, whether it's a pending exam on Monday or a fight with your parents or roommate. Breathe these things out and breathe in the Breath of Life.

Then, as your mind and soul are cleared of the problems and distress in your life, focus your thoughts on some phrase from the Psalms that you just read and repeat this phrase to yourself. A few good examples would be line 2, "As the deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God," line 3, "My being thirsts for God, the living God" or line 8, "All your waves and breakers sweep over me." As you continue to repeat this mantra, close your eyes, if it feels comfortable, and listen to the presence of God's people around you. When people begin filing into the church for services, take that rustle as the waves and breakers of God sweeping over you, and wait for the people to gather. Don't listen to individual conversations, but simply take in the overall roar, repeating the mantra in your mind and preparing for the worship of God. When someone nudges you to see if you're awake, or the congregation begins to sing the gathering hymn, silently open your eyes and greet the faithful around you with a joyful, searching smile. Praise the Lord with them.

Monday: Today, or any day, as you are sitting down to do homework, take some time alone for prayer. Mondays are generally busy days for me, since I need to catch up on all the work that I've put off during the weekend. As I start to fret about the million different things that are coming my way this week, it always helps to take time for focusing on God before I delve into my multiple tasks. Set up your study area as if you were going to spring into action. Then, when everything is ready, stop. Open up your Bible and read Matthew 6:25-34, "Dependence on God." Quiet your body and bring yourself away from your surroundings for the time being, just as you did for the Sunday meditation. This time, instead of focusing on a mantra, you're going to ask yourself a series of simple questions. Am I worried about the things I need to do today, tomorrow, and the next day? Is it important for me to accomplish all the things on my planner? How will these things further the Kingdom of God? Do I see the Lord providing for me or me providing for myself? Have there been times when I've felt God has failed me? If so, were these issues ever resolved? At that time, was I seeking the Kingdom and righteousness of God? What (or who) are my blessings? How do I know that they are blessings? Count your blessings until you can't think of any more. Then, opening your eyes and, thanking the Lord for the gift of intellect, begin your work.

Tuesday: On Tuesday, take some time out in the middle of your day, preferably right after lunch. If you don't have time for lunch, then do it after dinner. If you don't have time for dinner, you're in too big of a hurry. If you are eating alone, this is easy, if you're dining with some friends, excuse yourself a little early (this is O.K. once in a while). For this to be productive, you *have* to be able to not worry about your next class or appointment, so leave yourself at least twenty minutes. Find someplace out of the way to sit, where there will be little chance of running into someone and not a lot of busy student traffic. This is a short prayer, so it's one that you can do in the middle of a day. First, clear your mind of your remaining obstacles for the day, thanking God for the gift of food which you have just received. It's difficult to do this in the middle of the day, but if necessary, pray to Jesus to lift those thoughts from your mind. If you have your Bible with you, read Matthew 7:24-27, "The Two Foundations." For those of you who don't carry their Bibles around, meditate on this or another passage that you have written down or have memorized. Reflect on Christ's words. Then, close your eyes and center yourself in God's presence. Again, ask a few basic questions: What is my foundation? Do I sometimes feel like my foundation has been pulled out from under me? Where is my center today? Ask Christ to help you build your foundation in Him. Ask Christ to remind you always of your center,

even as you face the rest of your busy day. When the Spirit moves you, praise the Lord, pick up your backpack and be off to class.

Wednesday: Wednesdays always seem to be long days for me. Personally, I am blessed with a faith community that gathers every Wednesday night, but even though I can look forward to that all day, I sometimes need a good, prayerful start to get me past “hump-day.” By Wednesday, I’m usually either confident about the rest of the week or hoping that it gets over soon, and I often catch myself “wishing my life away” by hoping that the weekend comes soon. So, on Wednesdays I invite you to join me in allocating a large block of time in the morning (forty-five minutes to an hour) for centering yourself on God and evaluating how the week is progressing. However long it is, make it more extensive than your daily devotional. A good time for this is before your roommate gets up, if you can wake up that early, because this situation forces you to sit quietly. If you can’t do that, you may need to leave the room and find a quiet place. First, let Jesus remind you of the power of petitions by reading Luke 11:9-13. Ask that in your prayer you will be purely seeking of God’s will. Then, let the Father remind you of the presence of the Holy Spirit by praying Psalm 139, “The All-Knowing and Ever-Present God.” Take a big pause, and do as you did on Sunday morning, repeating a mantra chosen from this Psalm. Some possible choices are line 7, “Where

can I hide from your spirit?” and line 23, “Probe me, God, know my heart; try me, know my concern.” When you have been breathing in the Holy Spirit for a good amount of time, raise up to God the issues in your life right now. Mention your intentions for others as well as yourself, and concentrate on the improvements you can make the rest of the week over the things have been doing so far this week. Realize that although God knows everything, you still need to communicate your wishes and desires, so that you can know them and you can listen to God’s Word. With these intentions raised, simply listen for about five minutes (Don’t say anything out loud or in your mind). Then, read Philippians 4:4-9. Thank God for the gift of peace that he sent by dwelling among us in Jesus Christ, then ask God for the strength to keep growing and loving in Christ’s name. May God’s peace be with you.

Thursday: For many people at my college, Thursday has traditionally been a day of release from the built-up stress of the week, and this release can take many forms, from a visit to the bars and night clubs to an energetic Thursday night worship service, something which has become very popular here, thanks to some servants of Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit. I’ve found that when I’ve “run to the bars” on Thursday nights with my friends I’ve had little time to really sit and talk with those people because the bars are crowded and there are many other distractions.

But when I've taken the time to go to that late-night night worship service or just hang out with my friends in a different setting, my Thursday nights have been much more relaxing and enjoyable. It's a good time to catch up with my friends on how the week has gone, since some of them may be going home on Friday for the weekend. This is also the perfect opportunity to pray with your friends and appreciate silence together for a little while. Solitary prayer and meditation is an important aspect of building a personal relationship with God, but we also need to remember that Christian "communities" are important because they remind us of the need for spiritual support from our friends. The following is an example of a reflection that you can do with a small group of friends.

Gather your friends together (usually no more than 4-5) either before or after your evening activities, whether that's worship, a party, a movie, a concert, or just watching T.V. Sit in a circle with the lights dimmed and a single candle as the focal point. It's usually appropriate to begin the meditation by singing a song of praise that you all know or by playing some Christian music. The responsibility of preparing this meditation and choosing the Scripture can be passed from friend to friend each week. It can be a very simple "get away" from all the stresses of college life by using guided mental imagery to help the others imagine themselves in a scriptural scene with Jesus or another Biblical figure. For

example, after the mood has been set, the leader could read something like the following meditation that I adapted from Matthew 9:20-22.

Bring to mind an affliction that you have right now, something in need of healing, whether it's an emotional, physical, or spiritual need. Everyone has something that needs a little healing or comfort. Now close your eyes. You are alone with this problem on a sidewalk, headed out to get some help, whether it's to the pharmacy or to a friend's house. Where are you going? Look around you and see some of the landmarks along the path to remind you where you're going. It is late in the evening and there are few people to greet you on your path. Do you feel lonely? You're walking slowly, with heavy, plodding steps. Is it raining? Snowing? Windy? Cold?

You turn a corner of the sidewalk and suddenly hear the noise of an excited crowd. The mob is gathering in a vacant lot on the other side of the street. There are people of all races and cultures in the group, and they are all talking excitedly while others are continually joining the flock of people. You hesitate . . . and almost walk by, but then you catch a glimpse of what all the commotion is about. You see that the Teacher is there. Jesus is talking to the people, healing the sick, and attending to anyone who comes up to him. You're not sure if you should approach him. You have a hurt to

be healed, but he seems so busy he . . . he . . . he doesn't seem to have time for you. You turn to walk on to your destination, but then something pulls you closer to the vacant lot. Are you walking up to the mob? What are you doing? You stand at the back of the crowd, not wanting to bother Jesus, but deciding that if you could just touch his coat you would feel better. If you could only touch the clothing of the Anointed One, you would be healed.

You push through the crowds behind Jesus and suddenly, you're there. You're not more than five feet from the Messiah. He can't see you, but you sense that he knows you're there. What does he look like? Is he talking to a child? Is he preaching to the people? Is he healing the blind? The crowds push in around you and you jerk forward, at the mercy of the mob. You're falling to the ground, but as you do, you reach for his cloak and touch it. You have succeeded! Jesus turns and looks at the people behind him. He says that someone has touched his cloak, but the disciples just don't understand. They urge him to forget about it, since many people are pushing in and touching him. Then he sees you, and mercy fills his eyes from the depths of his heart. He says, "Courage! Your faith has saved you. You are cured." A realization of his healing power fills your body, fills your mind, fills your soul. You thank him, turn and leave the crowd of people to continue down the road of healing, with a brand new destination.

After this type of reflection, the people in the group can pray together in the circle, share prayer intentions for the week, or just talk about the healing that they all need, and then close with a song or the Lord's prayer.

Friday: My current roommate and good friend once pointed out to me that Fridays are never days unto themselves. He said that they are always "transition" days, based on recovering from something or looking forward to something. This is good insight, I think, and so I'm offering very little structure or advice for a Friday prayer or meditation. At the end of a long Friday, after all my meetings and classes are over for the week, I usually just want to collapse, but it does help me to do some journal writing about the week, if for no other reason than to just see if I remember what happened. I try to journal as much as I can, but it seems like my Friday entries are often more in-depth and reflective. This would be a good idea for a Friday devotion. One thing I often do in my journal is write letters to Jesus about the things that are going on in my spiritual life--it helps me open up more intimately to Christ.

Before writing in your journal, you could read through the Beatitudes (Matthew 5) and remember the people in your life that you consider to be "blessed." Are you on the list? Have your actions in the past week demonstrated the ways that you are blessed? Another option is

to reflect on the events of the week and try to see each major event as parable from which you can learn something. These event don't have to be heavily symbolic; just try to focus on the learning opportunities you have had throughout the week.

For example, just last week I almost slept through my own birthday party. I wanted to take a nap before my party, since I had been up late the night before working on a paper. I took the phone off the hook so no one would bother me and then I set my alarm clock, but I must have slept through it. Anyway, I awoke to pounding on my door from some friends who had stopped by to see what was going on. Of course they had been trying to call me for about the last hour. It was an hour after my party was supposed to have begun! I arrived at the gathering about an hour and a half late. Later on I realized that this experience was showing me that I sometimes need to allow others to reach out to me and celebrate with me, instead of shying away from the community that I have been offered. I need to put my phone *on* the hook once in a while and accept support from others. I see this now as a real-life parable for me, and although I'm not going to have such a dramatic or symbolic example every week, I do hope that I learn something new every day. After reflecting on some of the significant events or conversations of the past seven days, read Matthew 13:10-15, "The Purpose of Parables," where Jesus explains why he speaks in parables to the crowds. Ask Jesus in prayer to reveal the meaning and

learning of the parables of your life, and pray for the wisdom and knowledge to recognize some of the learning opportunities that are offered to you through your life events.

Saturday: I usually try to take a walk on Saturday. This may be because if I'm not doing anything but studying or reading, or relaxing on Saturday, I tend to fall asleep easily (which isn't always bad, I guess), since I'm not up and around, running from class to meeting to church to class, etc. It's only since I've been on a college retreat called Antioch a few times that I've come to see these walks as Emmaus walks, or journeys to find Jesus incarnate in daily life. So, for a Saturday reflection, one thing you can do is just take a walk by yourself or with a close friend who has agreed to talk about spiritual issues during the walk. The only rules are that you read and reflect on some Bible verse before you go (Luke 24: 13-35, the story of the disciples' Emmaus journey, might be a good one) and that you have no particular place to go or time limit for your walk. As you stroll, reflect on the events in your life right now and the decisions that you need to make in the near future. Ask God for clarity of heart or purpose. Most importantly, though, be open to any presence of God that might be waiting to pop up in your face. Stop and smell the people, the grass, the garbage, the snow, whatever you feel compelled to smell. If you see a friend, stop and talk with them, but don't bring an agenda to the conversation. Just

listen to them talk and ask them the questions that come to your mind. An Emmaus walk is about encountering Jesus where you least expect to see him, and the disciples recognized him in the breaking of the bread, a shared sacrament of a group of people. This is one time where listening, watching and keeping your senses tuned in is very important. When you start to feel distracted by inclement weather or the work you need to do, just stop what you're doing and walk back home, taking the time, if possible, to jot down something in your journal about your walk. This can sometimes be good material for later reflection and prayer.

As I've mentioned before, these meditations and reflections are only examples of things that have worked for me. Although I think it is essential to cherish silent time with God if you really want to grow spiritually, it should be something that fits your style. I hope that these examples have been helpful. The important thing is to just to make it a habit. It's inexcusable for Christians to say that they just don't have time to talk to Jesus. As Christians, the Divine should be the most important aspect of our lives! Create a silent space in your heart right now, and listen for the still, silent voice of God. Beautiful things will happen in prayer.

Chapter Two: Christian Fellowship

Just as the Holy Spirit draws us into prayerful communion with God, so does that same force draw us together and bind us with love; it's the Christian super-glue of humanity. Without loving bonds we can be lost sheep, even if we are meditative and holy in all other senses. For me, the second most important aspect of spiritual growth, besides learning to cherish silence with God, has been recognizing that spiritual growth does not occur in a vacuum. Sometimes, in my quest for piety or moral strength, I lose track of the importance of my relationships with others and I fail to realize that having good relationships with other humans is a central tenet of being human, and certainly of being Christian. To continue to move closer to God in our lives, it's important to develop friendships and community with fellow Christians, and to bring Christ into the center of our existence with others. This not only brings us comfort and joy but a network of believers who keep us accountable when we stray from the path of Light.

Jesus was well aware of the importance of others in his mission. True, he had a vision of the coming Kingdom of God, but he knew how that Kingdom would come about, through loving God with all our hearts and loving others as ourselves. To show the love that is his commandment, the love that is to bring us into right relationships with others, the

promised love of the Kingdom, he spoke no words of rejection, but rather, beckoned people to come to him: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28). All who desired to hear his teaching and feel his healing were welcome, whether they were tax collectors, rich people, fishermen, prostitutes, or children. Jesus loved all these, and he spoke his blessings on the outcasts, the poor in spirit, and the mournful. It is through this unconditional love and service of Christ that we become children of God. If we “love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us” then we affirm our identity as “children of our heavenly Father” (Matthew 5:43-44). C.H. Dodds claims that Jesus revolutionized the way that we are to relate to God, by addressing God as “Abba” or “Daddy,” and by suggesting that the envisioned Kingdom is like a huge, inclusive family (there are many rooms in our Father’s house); but Jesus also revolutionized the way that we are to relate to each other, as mature human beings connected by a childlike love. We are to be mature in our faith and prayer, but as humble as a child towards God and towards the other Christians in our midst. The selfless, trusting lover is the one who turns “and becomes like a child” and enters “the Kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3-4).

And so the same unseen Holy Spirit, the same Breath that Christ breathes onto his apostles after he rises from the dead (John 20:22), the same seed of truth that calls us to the Father is what pulls us together

lovingly when we desire to live in spiritual community with each other, when we pray together, serve each other, and truly love that part of Christ within each person. Yet I still desire to be left alone sometimes, to be unknown. I suppose that those feelings are natural from time to time, perhaps because we know that to truly live spiritually with others we must give much of ourselves to Christ, perhaps because we fear that others will not love us if they really know all our hidden faults and weaknesses, perhaps because we are selfish and do not want to have to give so much, perhaps because we don't want others to be able to "use" us or have power over us. But if we continue to pray and grow in our knowledge of the Word, in our understanding of God, and in our cognizance of our forgiveness through his love, then we will be delighted in the treasures that we have found, and we will be bursting to share them with others, to share the joy that we have found, and we will be like excited children after Christmas, chattering to each other of the gift of Christ we all have.

It would seem to be an inevitable next step, that when we receive spiritual insights from God through prayer then we will be bursting at the seams to share them with others and thus deepen the spiritual aspect of our friendships; but in actuality it is not that easy. We may be saddened or feel guilty by some of the things we have found out about ourselves, and we may first need to turn to others for help or comfort. We also fear opening up completely to others, we fear rejection, we fear interdependence in a

society that glorifies independence, we avoid selflessness while indulging in a selfish culture. And maybe sometimes we just think it's "un-cool" to pray together, to share God, and perhaps we seek more temporary bonds of friendship, such as playing video games, watching movies, or going out to the bars together. These experiences might indeed give us memories or temporary fulfillment, but as methods of bringing us closer together in Christ they leave us short. Don't get me wrong, leisure time is very important, and it can provide us needed rest and bonding with our friends, but there are times when it is beneficial for Christian friends to actively share the Gospel with one another, to be actively interested in how God is working in each others' lives. This is tough to do, and sometimes it's necessary to have a "safe" atmosphere to begin opening up to others, such as a retreat or a Bible study. Whatever it takes, it's important, because our Christian Faith needs this type of sharing to maintain its vitality.

With God's help, we can not only find growth in our personal prayer life, but we can also invite the Holy Spirit into our relationships. One of the first steps is to simply reach out in friendship to spiritual people. Seek them out, just as Christ has sought out the poor, the lonely, the forgotten . . . you. Just as Mother Teresa claims that there is much that we can learn about dignity and about Christ from the poor, so can we learn much about prayer from those who have sought Christ. So how can we tell who these people are, and how do we approach them when we find them? Jesus says

that we will know the false and true prophets by their fruits, in other words, by their way of life and their words (Matthew 7:15-20). So too do we know almost instinctively those who can enrich our understanding of Christ, those with whom we can share the Word. Most of all, it is a matter of asking those whom we respect and love about their own spiritual journeys, and sharing with them our own struggle to live a Christian life. Those who are deeply reflective and spiritual will be more than willing to share, and what they share will lead us into new insights into the Word.

I have had wonderful experiences by taking this very simple step. I used to strategically avoid all people who challenged me or my thinking in any way, and so I avoided the searching, saving Truth of the Word that was trying to reach me through the examples of others, whether it was a friend who knew I was troubled or a pastor asking me to reflect more deeply on my life's calling. It was not until recently that I began to see the futility of basking in the tiny glow of the candle of my own vision and point of view when there are millions of other flames out there with different candles, all burning from the fire of the one everlasting Light. I was first introduced to this sharing of the Light by someone who is now a dear friend, around the time of my first college retreat. At this retreat I felt comfortable for the first time discussing God with others, and for the first time I began to open up to others about my disappointment in religion and my own personal struggles with keeping the faith. I began to see that others have

had similar experiences to mine. It was an enlightening epiphany for me: a real "manifestation" of God in my life and my relationships. Since then I have felt the love of Christ enflamed in my heart through my friendships with others, I have shared stories of prayer and spiritual growth with others, and gained powerful insights about myself in the process.

One example of this is a recent friendship that I began over the summer with a former co-worker, which has blossomed into a wonderful, spiritually-enriching bond, mostly conducted through letters now. Through our letters and discussion, and through his sharing about his past experiences with witnessing to others, I have come to a clearer understanding about my own need to open up to people at a deeper level and allow others to help me break down the walls that hold me back from full communion with Christ--to break down the fears that hold me in the "boat," as Christ calls to me to cast away all fears and walk on the water with him. I believe that this growth would not have happened at this time in my life had God not blessed me with the possibility of this particular friendship, and if I hadn't taken the opportunity to form a friendship with someone who is spiritually probing and always seems to ask the right questions of me, the questions that cause me to re-think my views, re-pray my prayers, and re-evaluate my actions.

I believe it is the Holy Spirit that binds together spiritual people, urges them to constantly challenge each other, and seems to bring people

together across seemingly insurmountable distances. Since I have begun to actively form friendships in Christ, I have learned that I must tend to these friendships. I have found that the Holy Spirit seems to help us know each others' needs, even those unspoken or hidden needs. Whether we listen enough to the Spirit and to the Word is part of what determines how we react to others' needs. For instance, one time at the beginning of last semester I was walking home from the library and feeling rather lonely because some of my best friends who used to live in my dormitory had moved away to various places, and I felt the need to have a deep, personal conversation with someone who knew me well and could remind me of the presence of Christ. It was a lonely walk home, and I spent much of the short journey praying for the strength to deal with these feelings, and asking God for a peaceful spirit.

As I reached my room I decided to call one of my best friends, one who had been a spiritual support to me in the past. As I unlocked my door and walked in, the phone rang, and appropriately enough, at the other end of the line was my friend, waiting to talk to me. In this way, God again revealed to me the emptiness of the theory of coincidence. I was inspired to write the following poem, which has become the expression of my basic understanding of the Holy Spirit and how God sends the Spirit to envelop us and surround us. In the poem, the Spirit is personified as a feminine presence in our world, that originates from both the Father (the "Rock")

and the Son (Christ); it is through the Holy Spirit that we come to know a special part of God. But the poem also emphasizes what I see as the two most compelling Scriptural images of the Holy Spirit: the wisdom, or omniscience of God, which is how God probes and knows all parts of us (Psalm 139), and the Breath of Christ, or presence of peace that Christ leaves his disciples. Although in this poem I may refer to the Holy Spirit as a “she,” it isn’t because I don’t think God is our Father or that there are no masculine aspects of God; it’s only to show that the Holy Spirit often seems to me like a feminine presence that cares for life and knows us intimately like a Mother. So, I don’t think that God can be placed “neatly” into either a male or female box, because all masculinity or femininity comes from God the Creator. All the images in the poem are essential, because if She were just a fire, She would only burn in one particular place, and we would seemingly have to come to Her to be anointed, as Christ was anointed. Instead, She is both fire and Christ’s breath, which is everywhere, an eternal life-breath that is diffused wherever we are, if we are open to the Holy Spirit. We cannot help but be consumed by Her flames, since they are fire in the form of breath. Thus, we are all consumed, and somehow we breathe the same invigorating breath that fuels the fire deep in our hearts, and we know that spiritual part of Christ that exists in all of us.

‡
The
Breath
of Christ
we have, my
Friend, unspoken
& unseen. . .real. She
sees, unearths, probes, and
knows weaknesses, strengths, us.
She is between-among-beyond-all:
the Call that burns from Rock. To
know each other through time and
space is to know Her and She, us.
Peacefire...Lifebreath...Spirit.

Forming healthy, new relationships with prayerful people is a great step to take for growth in spiritual living, but if the fruits of this growth are not shared with your family members and your other friends, both past and present, then this growth may become stagnant, and you really may be running away from an area in your life that has the potential for even greater growth and reconciliation. Love must begin in the home. We know this. At the very least we are told this repeatedly by authors, counselors, pastors, and politicians. Mother Teresa puts it concisely and poignantly: “Peace and war begin at home. If we truly want peace in the world, let us begin by loving one another in our own families. If we want to spread joy, we need for every family to have joy.” So why is it so hard for us to bring love to our families and to our everyday relationships? Why do we so easily fall into apathy or cynicism around the people who are closest to us? Why is it easier sometimes to be listening and understanding with a new friend with whom you have a lot in common or even a perfect stranger than it is to be understanding and compassionate towards your parents, your grandparents, or your annoying neighbor who always seems to “waste your time” with unending stories or questions? This type of behavior seems to be based in what I call the gardening phenomenon.

The first principle of the gardening phenomenon is that people love to *plant* gardens. To be outside in the spring weather and put your hands in the soil, tilling the land and waiting expectantly for new growth, is a beautiful experience, and it is fulfilling to see the results of your work. For a time, just as at the beginning of a new friendship, you spend a lot of time caring for the young plants, cultivating them, watering them, even talking to them (for that extra little bit of carbon dioxide from your breath). This is what it's like to build new relationships in Christ, baptized by the spring water of love, "greened" by the fire of the Holy Spirit.

The second principle of the gardening phenomenon is that people generally hate to *weed* gardens. Even some faithful green-thumbers don't especially like to be gardening in late July, on their knees pulling out weeds in 100-degree weather, praying for the harvest to come soon. That's real work, and it's even more difficult if that garden was left unattended during June and July as you went on vacation and now there are weeds covering every open square inch of the plot, most of them taller than the plants. That's what it's like approaching an old relationship after a period of growth. You have a new perspective, but you've been out of touch for so long that there is a haziness there, and an uncertainty, and the weeds need to be sorted from the crops.

This is also what it's like if you're attempting to love someone who has never felt loved. It's scary, because their heart has been unattended so long that it's overgrown with weeds. It's a chore to get to know that person, to love that person, to let that person know that Jesus loves them. It takes a little help from God, and one of the best ways to start receiving that help is to just pray with that person. For our sake, Christ does just that. He approaches not the righteous but the sinners; he cares for the tax collectors and the prostitutes, because it is the sick who need the physician (Mark 3:16-17). True, it is the untended garden that needs the Gardener, so we must approach our weedy relationships with the faith that Christ goes before us, and will bring about a bountiful harvest through us, if we only give up control to him. Take what you have learned about God and present it in prayers with those friends and family members; ask Christ to send the Holy Spirit to "hoe" out the differences and make room for growth. This works to build trust in new relationships and bring Christ to old relationships that might not have been centered on God. Remember, the faithful gardeners, the ones who stick at it through August, are the ones who can enjoy the fruits of the harvest. They are the ones who can enjoy the celebrations that come from the growth of the spiritual relationship.

Prayer is essential to this process. Not long ago, I came to the realization that I really didn't know my siblings very well, and they weren't aware of all the changes going on in my spiritual life. I was discouraged, but I had the insight to begin to pray that I would have the chance to meet with each one of them and talk about the things going on in my life. I have six siblings and they are all considerably older than me, so I have never been as close to them as they were to each other. Anyway, I finally decided to write them all a letter, explaining some of the things that I wanted to talk about. Within two weeks I had the deepest discussions that I have ever had with three of them, and I felt confidently on the road to weeding out some of the emptiness that I had felt in those relationships. That amount of prayer and a little courage went a long way. Unfortunately, trying to be open to the healing of Christ in your family relationships or friendships will not always be met with support and acceptance. Jesus found this out when on his mission to spread the news of the ripening Kingdom of God, he encountered opposition to his teaching in his own hometown, where people only knew him as "the son of Joseph" and he was "driven out of town" by the people in the synagogue (Luke 4:29).

The college student coming home with new ideas about religion and beaming with the news of the Good Word can easily face misunderstanding and rejection from family members or neighbors. It can be quite discouraging to try to explain your "spiritual growth" to those who haven't

had the same experiences as you have. And sometimes, college students are guilty of putting Jesus into a “college box” and having a very narrowly defined definition of the Savior of all humankind. So what can college students do to share their spirituality with their friends and family back home? One thing, I guess, is to just keep in touch. Stop reading these words right now and go write a letter or make a phone call to a friend or family member who might not know what your friendship with God is like. Try it. And if this is too vague or too difficult for you, try just writing down what God means for you, and forming some sort of letter, story, or poem from those notes. If you’re not sure what to write, realize that it’s natural to feel uncertain or insecure about this topic, and then turn to the Lord in prayer, asking him for guidance in doing this.

O.K., since you’re still reading this and not writing or calling someone yet, then I assume that you’re having some difficulties with this little assignment. I’m not going to tell you how to write, just like I can’t tell you how to pray, but here are some reflection questions that might get you started. The first step, though, is to calm yourself and bring that person to mind. Remember their mannerisms, the expression on his or her face, appearance, good and bad things which that person has done, ways that that person has touched your life. Then, if you still need help thinking of what to say or write, go through the following list and jot down answers to these questions on a separate sheet of paper.

#1. What is your earliest memory of this person? How have they changed since then?

#2. What does this person know about you and your spiritual journey? What would you like him or her to know about you?

#3. What qualities of a faithful person does he or she exhibit? How has he or she been like a page in your scrapbook of what God means to you? What gifts of this person do you admire?

#4. What difficulties, struggles, weaknesses has this person overcome or battled successfully? How do you know this? What failures have they had, and how have they dealt with them?

#5. What have you learned from this person?

#6. What would you like this person to pray for you about?

#7. How has your spiritual life changed since the last time you talked with this person?

As Christians, we are by nature a missionary church. We believe Christ when he tells us, as he did his disciples, to “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit” (Matthew 28: 19). We don’t take it as just a suggestion, or as something that we can do if we feel like it; if these are some of Christ’s final words to his disciples before he ascends into heaven, they must be important. But the question throughout the centuries within

Christian society has not been whether we should witness to others, but rather, *how* we should witness to others. Should the Truth be revealed mainly through word or deed, or a combination of both? Should it be forced on people in through coercion or political power? Should it be drilled into small children like their arithmetic? Can it possibly be revealed like this? At times throughout history some of these tactics have been the practice of Christian missionaries and the Western imperialist countries that have supported them as a means of gaining some degree of control over the country. With this issue, the question we must continually ask ourselves and bring to prayer is “how did Jesus evangelize?” How did he spread his message of the coming Kingdom of God, and how did he express the love and forgiveness that he came to bring?

Jesus sometimes used harsh words or startling parables to teach the people, but he also cautioned the Pharisees against “over-zealous” evangelism, especially when it is hypocritical and not backed up by true faith and love: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You traverse sea and land to make one convert, and when that happens you make him a child of Gehenna twice as much as yourselves.” (Matthew 23:15). Jesus didn’t “traverse sea and land” to spread his message of the coming Kingdom, he traversed heart and soul. He brought love and healing to whomever he encountered along his journey. To those who believed in him and had faith, he gave his healing power. To those whom

he saw in need, he offered his love and comfort. To those who questioned him, he preached the Word. Thus, beyond just building new Christian friendships with people and bringing the fruits of our growth to all our current and past friendships, we must seek to build Christian friendships with those who are open to God's love in their lives, since Christ tells us, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd" (John 10:16). But we must open up these friendships in a Christ-like way, not overly concerned with "traversing land and sea" to "win converts" by our own efforts, but simply being a channel of Christ's love and glory through the witness of our own lives. I believe that Cardinal Suhard best sums up this type of witness when he says: "To be a witness does not consist in engaging in propaganda nor even in stirring people up, but in being a living mystery. It means to live in such a way that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist."

Our communication with others and our prayerful communication with God are only methods for sustaining Christian friendships, they are not the mortar that builds them in the first place. That mortar is Christ's love, which is manifested in the Gospels and in our lives by two very important actions: selfless service and forgiveness. True, Christ's love is boundless in its power and its many forms, but these two forms of loving

seem to be especially prevalent in the Gospels as ways that Christ teaches us to love one another.

First of all, the Christians who aspire to serve Christ through others must be aware of the need to empty themselves of concern primarily for their own needs. True, all Christians need to have a healthy level of self-esteem, or self-love, in order to be well-balanced, healthy human beings, but as Christians we must go beyond that to the deeper self-esteem that comes from loving and being loved by others. As Millard Fuller, founder of Habitat for Humanity says, “You’re not doing anyone a favor to ‘love your neighbor as yourself’ if you don’t love yourself very much.” Seeing God in all things inherently means seeing God in yourself, too. But the service that Christ calls us to means letting go of selfish desires and actions, and holding the presence of God in others in as high esteem as we hold the presence of God in ourselves. Loving service of others requires some denial of the self’s needs: not devaluation of the self, or denial of self to the extent of self-harm, but a selfless focus, recognizing the needs of others and acting on those.

As a college student, it can be easy to get caught up in a self-focus on life, especially since college students are so busy these days with studying, working, exercising, and socializing. Even service activities, such as volunteering at a homeless shelter, visiting the elderly in nursing homes, or helping with Special Olympics can be self-centered activities if they are

done in the name of “looking good on a resume” or if they are done not with a loving heart but a condescending pity for those who “need our help.” Mother Teresa again reminds us that the poor do not need our pity, only our love. Even service done because of feelings of guilt that one “hasn’t done enough” can be self-serving instead of “Christ-serving,” performed to bring oneself the inner peace of “doing something good” instead of to love the presence of Christ in other human beings. Before Christ asks anything of us, he asks us for love, because that is what he places in front of us as the reason for service. This might be revealed to us by the following discussion with Simon Peter:

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” He then said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was distressed that he had said to him a third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:15-17).

In this passage, Jesus does not ask Peter what he has done to “Feed his lambs” or “Tend his sheep,” but instead he asks Peter if he “has what it takes” to perform this service. That is, he asks him if he has the motivation of love before he asks him to serve his brothers and sisters. It might be construed that Christ is challenging Simon Peter to put his love into action, that is, if he truly loves Christ, to start showing it this day through loving

service of Christ's flock. This is true, but I also think that Christ continually asks Peter "Do you love me" because he wants Peter to see that he is concerned with our motivations for service, rather than just the fact that we do it. Not only does Christ ask us to put our faith into action, but he also wants our motivation to be the love for his presence in all his people. Here is a prayer that I have written which reminds me of what it means to be a loving servant:

Loving, serving Lord Jesus, I often think of your humble service at the Last Supper, as you washed your disciples' feet. And I wonder, as Peter does, "Why?" Why does the mediator of God and man, the communicator of the Word that saves, the exalted Prince of Peace feel compelled to kneel at his followers' feet, to dig out the grime between their toes, to anoint their lowliest of body parts with oil?

Why do I feel that you would never wash my feet?

Is it because I fear that you do not love me enough or that I am not worthy enough?

None are worthy, but love makes all things possible.

Then I realize that if you do not wash my feet, then I have no tangible gift of your desire to love, and my faith means that I have no reason to love others.

If I claim to be in you, yet do not accept and love that serving part of you, then I have no reason to serve others. My very desire to serve others is contradicted by my inability to accept that you were yourself a humble servant.

But you are love.

You are life.

I come before you: anoint my feet that they may seek out you in others, anoint my hands, that I may approach others with them open, pleading, asking to be used for your work, anoint my heart that I may have the grace to believe in your boundless love forever. Wash my feet, dear Lord, and thank you for the chance to wash yours. Amen

The other essential ingredient of the mortar that bonds Christians together in love is forgiveness. It, like service, is truly done only out of sincere love for the other person. Forgiveness, therefore, should not simply be lip service or done out of pity for someone who has committed a wrong against you. Rather, as Jesus reveals to us about service, forgiveness is a gift given freely to us by God, and so it should be given freely to one another. Just as the servant of Christ in others cannot put on airs or restrictions in giving out service, so must the one who forgives

remember his or her own need for forgiveness, and recall that our grace to forgive one another comes only from the Holy Spirit.

In Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving servant. This is the story of the king who settled all his accounts with his servants and then immediately afterwards, one of the servants who pleaded for forgiveness of his debt to the king and was granted it, went out and exacted a debt from a fellow servant. When the indebted servant was unable to pay, the other put him in prison until he paid it back in full. Then, when the king heard about this, he said to the servant, “should you not have pity on your fellow servant, as I have had pity on you?” He then threw the man to the torturers until he paid the entire debt.

This story is a significant example of forgiveness for a number of reasons. First, Scripture states that the debt which the second servant owed was “a much smaller amount.” It is true that we owe God so much more than anyone could owe us, and that we have done more to grieve God than anyone could do to cause grief in us. This alone should give us the reason to humbly forgive others the wrongs that they do to us, and accept the forgiveness that others offer us. Forgiving others does not mean that we should passively allow them to continue hurting us: Christianity is not sadomasochism! But it does mean for us to be humble enough before one another to accept and give forgiveness freely when it is desired.

This “humility” aspect of forgiveness brings up the second important part of the parable, which is that there is only one king in the story, and the two people who are the debtors are both servants of the king. Beneath the merciful, yet powerful rule of the Lord, we are all in the same boat, so we all should be humble and forgiving of one another. It’s an aspect of love that runs deep in our souls, since we are “tortured” in our own consciences if we fail to forgive others. We are imprisoned by our grudges, and “locked away” from fellowship with God and others if we fail to forgive. Jesus reminds us of this, by telling us that we, like the servants of the parable, will be punished if we do not truly make the effort to forgive each other: “So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother **from his heart.**”

As Christians, we must remember that loving forgiveness comes always from God, and that we can only be mirrors of that true forgiveness which was shown to us in the sacrifice of Christ Jesus. Jesus was sent to us because God loved us, not because he just felt sorry for us or felt obligated to forgive us. And so our attitude towards forgiveness must be similar, and it must reflect the loving words of Jesus to the woman caught in adultery: “Has no one condemned you?” “Neither do I condemn you. Go [and] from now on do not sin any more” (John 8: 10-11) Saying you forgive someone for something which they are sorry for, and yet condemning them in your heart for doing it does not agree with the spirit

of Christ's forgiveness. The forgiveness of Christ, done without condemnation and out of love, gives us freedom and it should be the blueprint for our forgiveness of each other, which helps us to live in right relationships and continue to witness to one another. The forgiveness that we receive through accepting Christ as our salvation is of course the most central type of forgiveness in our faith, because it shows that "God has loved us, and sent us his son as an expiation for our sin. Beloved, if God so loved us, let us also love one another." (1 John 4:10-11). Forgiveness and service, when they are blessed by the Holy Spirit and when they are done humbly out of love, are just two of the loving bonds that hold Christians together in friendship. Jesus calls us to come together as friends through loving service and forgiveness of both our friends and enemies.

Chapter Three: Faith and Conversion

“Prayer is not just spending time with God. It is partly that--but if it ends there, it is fruitless. No, prayer is dynamic. Authentic prayer changes us--unmasks us--strips us--indicates where growth is needed. Authentic prayer never leads to complacency, but needles us--makes us uneasy at times. It leads us to true self-knowledge, to true humility.

--Teresa of Avila

In the last chapter I talked about how we can develop fellowship with other Christians through prayer and through Christ’s commandments to serve and forgive one another lovingly. This fellowship is meant as a support system to help us seek fellowship with God and give us the strength for conversion. Fellowship with God means “talking with God,” but it also means “walking in the light” with God and bringing our sinfulness into the light of God’s love. Conversion from sins can come from many reasons, such as a desire not to seem like a hypocrite to other people who know that we are a Christian, but I think that deep conversion comes from the Faith that God loves us and wants us to love him and the commandments of love that were revealed to us through Christ our Lord. Conversion is more about love than obedience.

As a Christian, I need faith in Christ’s mercy and resurrection to give me the strength for conversion. Without the same Faith that the Christian communities had in the Acts of the Apostles, the Faith that stayed strong with them through persecutions, jailings, and stonings, the Faith that

they kept through all this and which still caused them to proclaim Jesus Christ as risen Lord--without *this* Faith, I would be lost and apathetic about conversion. Faith in God's deliverance through Christ makes me want to get to know the Word, study it, reflect on it, memorize it, and live it so that I may know the joy and peace of God more fully. Then, with the help of the Holy Spirit, I can act on that Word and grow more closely to God in friendship. That, of course, is the ultimate goal of conversion. It would be futile and empty to turn from sin if friendship and joy with Christ were impossible, and if the only reason that we were doing it was to "not look like a hypocrite" in front of others. We know from the Gospel of John, though, that Jesus has chosen us and wants to be our friends, and he will call us his friends if we keep his commandment to love God and love one another.

"This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father."
John 15:12-15

The real possibility of friendship with Christ is important for my journey of conversion. If I had only tried to convert from my sins, thinking that I would go to heaven if I could just follow God's law, then even if I had succeeded, why would I want to be in heaven? Who would want to spend eternity with a complete stranger?! No, I ask God to cleanse me of my sins

for the love of Christ. The love and friendship with Christ is the reason why I hate my sins, why I desire to walk in the Light.

In order that we might enter into conversion, which leads to fellowship with God and other Christians, we must first acknowledge our sins and admit our weaknesses. For it is written: “If we say ‘we are without sin,’ we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). Then, beyond that step, once we bring to conscious knowledge our sins, we must continue by asking God for forgiveness, and we are promised that he is faithful and just: “If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and *cleanse* us from every wrongdoing” (1 John 1:9).

Sometimes that first step of discerning our sins may be harder than it seems, and so it’s more difficult to come to grips with our sinfulness. We know this is so because of what Paul tells us, that “even Satan masquerades as an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14). For example, there are some sins of mine which I have rationalized for so long that I have little desire to be released from them until I have hurt someone because of that sin and suddenly feel remorseful. Conversion is a life-long process and I could never do it on my own, just by listening to my own conscience, because my conscience can sometimes play tricks on me. Along with listening to my conscience, I need to know the Word and I need the wisdom of the Holy Spirit in my heart.

It may also be hard to figure out what our real sins are, because our surface sins can be just the tips of the iceberg of our deeper desires. In this case, recognizing one's sins requires an examination of conscience, or, a "long, *intimate* talk with Christ." There are many methods of examining one's conscience that work for different people, although one that works for me is simply listing the things that I have regretted doing lately under three categories, "self, others, and God". Then, I draw connections between the three lists, and I usually find that the deep causes of my sins are to be found in the connections that I can make among these three areas. For example, in the following essay, which recounts an incident from my junior high days, it would be easy to say that my sin was having a short temper, but looking back on it now, I would have to say that the real source of my sin was my irrational drive towards perfectionism and my lack of trust in God. If I had not been so concerned with doing everything "perfectly," I would not have become impatient or lost my temper. It was an attitude, not an action, that was at the root of my sin.

Boiling Point

Idling down the roaring, clattering engine of the John Deere 2640 tractor, I pushed in the clutch halfway (as far as my left leg would reach) and then, putting all my weight down on the brake under my right foot, I brought the machine to a halt just inches away from the gate to the hog

yard and quickly forced the stick-shift into park. Relieved that I had restrained the tractor before it plowed through the fence and stagnated by the oppressive heat and humidity, I vegetated for a while in the sticky vinyl seat and reflected on the simplicity of my assignment.

The thirty pigs in this yard had outgrown their living space and my orders were to take them to a different yard where they would have more room and could be fed a more appropriate diet for their increasing size. All I had to do was transfer these hogs to the hog-hauling crate that was attached to the back of the tractor and then drive this crate down to the other pig pen and let them out there. I'd seen this done a million times, so I felt like I was in complete control of the situation, even though I'd never actually moved pigs by myself. "Really, how difficult could it be?" I asked myself; "They're just a bunch of little pigs."

I climbed down from the 2640 and marched through the mud puddles left by the previous night's rain to open the gate for the impatiently idling green tractor. Even the minuscule amount of physical exertion that was required to unwire the gate and pull it open through the sloppy mire of manure in the yard made me sweat. My torn gray T-shirt was pressed between my damp torso and the putrid, wet air that permeated the farm,

forming a steam bath between the fabric and my skin. I was being boiled alive in my own clothes.

The action heated up more quickly than I was expecting, as about eight of the thirty pigs charged out the unattended gate while I was driving the tractor into the yard. I slammed on the brakes and sprinted out the yard to try to head off the pigs before they discovered their untested freedom and scattered across the farm. It must have been quite a sight: one impatient 13 year-old trying to corral eight stubborn, scared pigs, and all of them sliding around in a foot of mud and wet hog feces.

Once I had succeeded in closing the gate without losing any pigs, I realized that with the commotion bubbling up in the hog yard, there was no way that those pigs were going to go submissively into the crate. The only obvious solution was to move them into the pig house, back the tractor up to the door and then maneuver them into the crate that way. I felt like a tiny matador trying to mobilize thirty hot-tempered, two-ton bulls. After about a half-hour of darting from corner to corner of the pen, all the pigs were finally contained in the house, but I had completely lost my cool.

By the time that half of the panting pigs from the shelter had been chased into the crate, I was sweating tears and kicking hogs and displaying all the emotional maturity of a two year-old. It seemed to me that the pigs

were conspiring against me; every time I succeeded in chasing two into the crate, three more decided that they wanted to escape. The pig house was like an unbearable sauna, and the hogs were about as frightened and overheated as I was, but the shit didn't really hit the fan until I acquired a weapon. Out of frustration, I grabbed a long steel rod that was used to hold the gate of the crate shut. The bar had been heating up out in the sun all day, but it didn't burn my skin through the hot pads of my cloth gloves, which made me impervious to the scathing heat and deadliness of the steel.

It started out innocently, as I just tapped the rebellious pigs lightly in order to coerce them into the crate, but once I started to wield that rod, I was transformed from a matador fighting thirty bulls to a Neanderthal chasing down a bunch of field mice. My size and power increased beyond my control, and my own anger became much like the tractor that I had so much trouble mastering. It infuriated me that the pigs still did not yield to my authority. Rather, they became even more frightened and disobedient. One small pig was particularly frazzled by my menacing posture and chose to cower in the corner of the pig house. After all the other pigs had boarded the crate and I turned to check one last time for escapees, I spotted this little runt and tiptoed towards him, planning to grab him by the leg. He had seen this ploy before, though, and he deftly avoided my grasp, letting out a

piercing scream. This scream struck me as rude, considering all the work I had gone through to transfer this pig to a new home, and a frightening fit of rage burst out from deep inside me. I became an aerosol can tossed carelessly into a cauldron of flames, and my anger was the compressed, combustible concentration of gases, heated and excited beyond the capacity of that metal can to contain them. The little pig became to me an object of reproach. I gripped the red-hot steel rod in my right hand and vowed to "teach that pig a lesson." With one quick smack to the side of the pig's head, I shattered its skull and its tiny body flew silently against the wall. Warm, dark blood trickled out of its mouth. Its body fell into fits of deathly quiet convulsions, which shocked and sickened me. I took two steps back and contemplated what I had done. I had killed a hog. I froze in horror and the small pigs that had witnessed the atrocity turned and retreated back into the hog crate. My lukewarm sweat and tears flowed uncontrollably as I stood there, covered from head to toe in hog crap, the first and only mourner of my first and only murder victim.

My emotions had boiled over, but after taking a few deep breaths and forcing myself off the burner, the flames of rage gave way to the icy-cold sweat of dread. My whole body was chilled like the pale skin of a heat-stroke

victim, and I shivered to think about what my father (and boss) would say if he knew what I had done. I had wasted a life and killed a perfectly good hog.

As I regained my composure, I coolly took the necessary precautions to make sure that no one would ever find out about this. I cleaned up all the blood and frigidly grabbed one of the limp legs of the still-twitching pig to knock its head against a fence post and "put it out of its misery." Then I tossed the body into the loader bucket on the front of the tractor and left the pig yard, pulling 29 pigs with heat exhaustion behind me in a grim funeral procession for the one dead-cold pig in the loader. I flung the pig out into the corn field, with no gravestone or eternal flame to mark where it landed on the dark, cool soil. But even though I've covered up the death of this anonymous young swine for eight years, that day when my temper boiled over has remained important for me as a gauge for growth. Whenever I am tempted to explode in anger, I remember the harm that I have caused when I have been unable to control that emotion.

No matter how often I advocate non-violence in daily life and world affairs, I am continuously reminded by this incident that people have their own individual boiling points. As a member of *Pax Christi USA*, a Christian group that works for peace and social justice around the world and opposes American support of oppressive dictatorships, I know enough about world-

wide violence and war that I am truly frightened when I reflect on the similarities between the violent acts committed by oppressive regimes and the rage that burst from me on that fatal day. I know that if I want to be a voice of justice and nonviolence, I must continually monitor the effects of my own actions on others and constantly pray to Jesus, my model of nonviolence, for a peacemaking spirit. Bringing peace to my relationships with family, friends and acquaintances is the first and biggest step in allowing Jesus to bring peace to this earth.

How akin to the intimidating tanks of tyrants was my big green tractor when it rolled into that tiny, imprisoned country of pigs, and how similar to the powerless people suffering under the rule of despots were those terrified creatures, crouching in the corner out of fear of incarceration or punishment. And sadly, how much like an exacting dictator was I, in hot pursuit of rebels and free-thinkers, exasperated by the truancy of my subjects to the point where I abused my sheer power and the availability of superior weaponry (in the form of a steel bar) to murder the innocent and torture the living with the threat of death. I recognize my own frailty as a peacemaker, and I remember my former tendency to use violence as a way to solve my problems. That is why each day I must renew

my vow of nonviolence and pray for the strength and the courage to be a channel of God's peace.

Just the act of writing this essay has brought me a lot of growth, and looking back on it now (it was written about a year ago), I can also see how much I've grown in knowledge of my own sins. Although the essay focuses on my anger and my need to pray for a non-violent spirit, I have since come to recognize that the source of my anger and the source of the anger of violent dictators is probably very different. My boiling point is usually reached when I become disgusted with how imperfect I am, and so the way for me to avoid reaching that boiling point is to drive away my perfectionism and remember that God alone is perfect, and I am only called to be what God has made me. Consequently, I have become increasingly more patient with myself, although I have a long way to go. This has done more for me than just praying for my temper to be reduced, and it shows why continued examination of conscience is important.

I find essay-writing of this kind to be very therapeutic and helpful for conversion, because it allows me to sit down with God and map out where I was, where I am, and where I'd like to be. It's a form of prayer that helps me recognize the cause of my sin, and sometimes I will just stop and write a letter to Jesus in my journal, explaining my sins and telling him how I feel, and how much I desire his mercy and love. In this way, my

journal has become a time-line of growth for me, because I can look back through it and see how well I'm progressing at conversion in various areas.

After identifying the base causes of my sin, the next step would be to ask God to remove that desire, and then act on that prayer and accept the desire for conversion into my heart and mind. Jesus said that if our right hand causes us to sin, we should cut it off and throw it away, but I'm sure that Jesus understood that is isn't our hands or our body parts that cause us to sin. If I were a kleptomaniac and I cut off both of my hands, I would still probably find a way to steal things. What Jesus meant to do was provide a graphic example of what it means to purge our unhealthy desires from our minds. Cut them off, and throw them away!! Our desires for satisfactions of the flesh and our attitudes are what lead us away from God. These are the parts of us that need to be cut off and thrown away, not our eyes or our hands.

Realizing this, it becomes important for us to drive these desires from our bodies through the power of the Holy Spirit, as God uses the Spirit through our prayer and the Word. It is only grace, the gifts of God in our souls, the very presence of God within us, that has the power to replace our sin and drive it out, because without grace we wouldn't be satisfied without our sinful desires. Grace fills up the void in our hearts after sin has been removed, and I continually praise God for that.

And so if grace is our true weapon against sin, it seems reasonable that we ask Jesus for grace when we are desiring conversion in our lives. I also like to keep the Risen Lord in my mind's eye, to reflect on how Jesus is depicted in the Gospels after the Resurrection, because the Resurrection is the single-most important event in the Gospels for inspiring us to conversion. Without Jesus' rising from the dead, what would my life be like now? What reason would I have to reform my life or follow him? What good would my life be worth? What faith would I have in his salvation had he not appeared to the apostles after his rising or breathed on them the Holy Spirit (John 20:22)? My faith and love of Christ is at the core of my desire for conversion. I want to let go of my sins so that I can more fully embrace Christ.

The following prayers attempt to address typical issues of conversion that face college students today. They are not meant to be all-encompassing, but from my own experience and my relationships with college students, it seems like most students can relate to at least one of these situations. Use them and add to them as you wish; they are meant as reflections and beginning points for your own personal prayer.

Prayer for Unselfishness

"Sell your belongings and give alms. Provide money bags for yourselves that do not wear out, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven that no thief can reach nor moth destroy. For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be." (Luke 12:33-34)

O Risen Lord you gave of yourself,
and lost your life for my sake,
You delivered your spirit to the Father
and received eternal reward.
Rid me of all my selfish wants,
purge them from my being.
Take my security, my interviews.
Take my intellect and my grades.

Blessed with a college education,
with an elite degree,
Blessed with a supportive fellowship,
companions to light the way,
Given the riches of first-world comfort
with the luxuries of Western life
Still I am unhappy with what I have,
I desire earthly things.

I fret over my college loans,
and my service "looks good" on a résumé.
I crave accomplishments and honors,
to build up my portfolio.

I wail over cafeteria food
and forget those who are starving.
I curse the failing job market
and cry out "Persecution!"

Buy you, O Lord are meek . . . take my pride.

You, O Lord are poor . . . take my riches.

You, O lord are humble . . . take my boasts.

You, O Lord are persecuted . . . take my prejudice.

Give my comforts to those whom you hear,

for you hear the cry of the poor.

Give my peace to those whom you love,

for you love the broken-hearted.

Help me give to those whom you love,

and be humble with my success.

Help me see beyond my wants

and know that my journey lies there. Amen.

Prayer in Despair, due to Stress

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid." (John 14: 27)

Dear Lord Jesus, I am weary,
 speak a word that will rouse me!
Another morning, another night,
 open my ears that I may hear!
Open my eyes to the news of salvation,
 to the Good News of your joy!
For in spite of your grace and mercy,
 despite your love and forgiveness,
I am weary from my dilemmas
 despairing from temporary problems.

A test looms ahead,
 a paper lies in wait,
While meetings steal my minutes,
 and three jobs take my hours.
My friends cannot comfort me,
 for their trials are the same.
I cry out across the campus,
 as through a barren desert:
"Is there no one to lighten my load,
 not one to calm my stress?"

"O Lord, come to my aid!
Make haste to my side!
I need you, Jesus, in my heart,
I want you on my mind!
I yearn to live in your peaceful spirit,
to drink from your waters of life.
Your love, O Lord, is for me!
Your love--reveal it to my heart!
Raise me from my weariness,
and cleanse my sin of despair. Amen.

For Deliverance from Addictions

"Jesus answered and said to her, 'Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.'" (John 4: 13-14)

Lord Jesus I am drowning
again in this shallow well.
For an empty buzz, a lustful thought,
I turn my back on you.
For a warm drag or a hunger binge,
I fast from the Bread of Life.
For a one-night stand, an empty curse
I betray my closest friend.
For a shopping spree, a tasteless joke,
I deny the warmth of your love.

With the *enemy* all around me, Lord,
it's *needless* to place blame.
I *seek* no rationale,
for I know your Word and Truth.
I *desire* no self-pity,
I am sorry, I am ill.
Convert me, O Lord, and *expose my* addictions,
Enlighten my blind devotion to them.

Hold me, Jesus, fill me up,
Give me strength to grow.
Enrich me with your Holy Spirit,
I accept you in my heart once more.
I want to be satisfied with you,
to be truly whole in you.
I rejoice in you, Lord! I rejoice in your Light!
I rejoice in your purity and healing! Alleluia!

For my Sins of Omission

"He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.' And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." (Matthew 25: 45-46)

You were there, Risen Lord,
but my eyes did not see.
You were staring at me
in the dejected, down-turned face,

You were crying to me
in the silent, invisible tears
Of that lonely guy that lives down the hall:
Room 205? 219?
Of that broken-hearted woman
who I passed on the street.

But what could I have done?
What could I have said?
I turned on a dime and I walked away,
They don't want *my* help--do they?
Risen Lord, you walk transcendently,
through walls of doubt and fear,
You invite yourself into the forgotten ones,
the ones I'd like to omit.
It's easy to love . . . those who love me,
I flourish in love for family and friends.

But I have often omitted those whom you love,
and for me at times they cease to exist.
They are the nameless suffering on T.V.,
the tortured and starving without a face.
They are the lonely orphan,
the abused or neglected child,
The ignored spouse and the outcast student,
the forgotten nursing home inmate.

I've conveniently put them in neat boxes
and hidden them out of sight.

Incarnate Lord, I know that you are there.
Help the grace in me to love the grace in them.
Help me be a humble servant to all,
and your body will be one,
Enflame your love in me,
I could do so much more:
More to spread your Word,
to help the lives of your people everywhere.
Convict me, Lord, I want to do your will.
Convert me, Lord, I want to serve you in all.

For Increased Devotion to Prayer

"When he returned to his disciples he found them asleep. He said to Peter, 'So you could not keep watch with me for one hour? Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.'" (Matthew 26: 40-41)

Awakening and beginning another day,
groggy thoughts run through my mind.
I check my schedule, O, man!
I'm already ten minutes late.
Washed and dressed, I gobble food,
inhaling every bite.
Walking to class, You cross my mind,
but only for a second.

I race through the day, checking my watch,
to be sure I waste no time.
Studying, testing, eating, napping,
eating, working, falling asleep.
But your voice calls to me,
quiet and still it touches my heart.
You are the invisible classmate beside me,
the patient customer for my attention.

Yours is the patience and faith I lack,
you always wait for me to draw near.
Why be far from me, O my Lord?
Why be hidden? Why hide your face?
I miss you, Lord, I easily forget,
Send me a vision, a simple reminder!
Ah, but my impatience and sin is my post-it note,
the *Walkman* blaring in my ears.

You show me a yet better way,
you want me to come to you.
I spurn you, Lord, through mindless neglect,
I turn my back on you, engrossed in my schedule.
I want to be committed to my love for you.
I want to worship your name forever.
When I fall, I know that I have strayed,
I have cut loose my lifeline when I fail.

Help me be strong to continue in faith,
 help me strive to reflect on your Word.
For your Word raises me up, saves me from evil,
 I am unharmed when I speak with you. Amen.

For a Non-Judgmental Attitude

"How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me remove that splinter in your eye,' when you do not even notice the wooden beam in your own eye? You hypocrite! Remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter in your brother's eye." (Luke 8: 42)

You, O Lord, are the mighty King!
 The Lord over all this campus!
Your grace and mercy are shown in the classrooms,
 The lives of your faithful proclaim your Word.
You are the President of the government,
 The Referee on the field.
You are the Dean of all colleges,
 Creator of all wisdom and love.

Then why, O Lord, do they not know you?
 These people ignore your glory!
The faithless run selfishly along,
 Storing up pleasures on earth.
The hypocrites go planting your Word,
 but are revealed by the fruits of their deeds.
It pains me, Jesus, to see this;
 your people running towards decay,

But I am shaken, too, by my own sin,
my failings cause me to tremble.
Hypocrisy has been mine as well.
I put on self-righteous airs.
Forgive my sins and quench my desires,
my wants for earthly things I detest.
Free me from the sin of judging others,
that I may not be condemned.

Help me, remove the wood from my eye,
that I may be an ambassador of Truth.
You, Jesus, are the only Judge,
I humbly stand before you.
Bless me with my faults, Lord and Judge,
that I may be strong in this weakness.
Keep pride and conceit far from me,
for righteousness comes only from you. Amen.

Prayer for True Wisdom

"For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the learning of the learned I will set aside.'" (1 Corinthians 1: 19)

On college campuses, your faithful are battered, Lord.
We are blessed with persecution.
The faithless generation bombards us with "facts,"
some true, some misinformed
The intellectuals question our reason,
the relativists our "proof,"

The cynics confront us with gloom,
and New-Agers offer us toys.

We sometimes fall into silent stupor,
or charge carelessly with accusatory words.

Tempers flare, and you are forgotten
in our quest to salvage our pride.

O Master Teacher, grant us your wisdom
that was revealed to us in your Word.

Give us patience to be your witness,
give us the calm that reflects your peace.

When drilled with questions and accusations,
send down your Holy Spirit.

We will proclaim our faith
and your Spirit will burn in our hearts.

We will profess your Wisdom,
your Spirit helps us speak all tongues.

Glorify the Lord, all you students of God!

Sing to the Lord with your intellect!

Study the Word with your hearts all opened!

Be true to the Gospel, all you pupils of Christ!

For Christ has been faithful to us.

He has risen for us, Alleluia!

He is there in our times of need.

He is there in times of doubt.

In the classrooms, in the courtyards,
in the coffee shops and gyms,
In the churches and in the bars,
in night clubs and shopping malls.
Your name will not be forgotten, Lord,
your mission not denied,
Your grace will lift us from all doubt,
Your Spirit will triumph in us! Amen.

Rejoice in your Conversion!

I hope that these psalm-prayers have demonstrated my view that conversion is not a process of getting down on yourself or beating up on yourself, but of rising up. The Christian path is a cyclical “Die, Rise, Go” pattern, and so even though we continue to fall, we are given the strength through grace to rise up from our failures and carry on. But we have to ask God for that grace and forgiveness, and I hope that I’ve successfully made that the focus of these prayers.

Conversion shouldn’t be done grudgingly or with cynicism, and it certainly shouldn’t be done to please God or “gain our salvation,” because that would be impossible. It is done only to make us more able to love Christ. We rise up to serve, love, and devote our lives to Christ. I hope to explain my view on this a little more clearly by relating a short story:

There was a woman who was on her way to meet Jesus, and she didn't know exactly what to bring to him as a gift (you can imagine her dilemma, I'm sure). But she ended up packing two heavy suitcases. In one suitcase she put all her failures and disappointments, all the things that had caused her grief in the past--including all her sins. She knew that Christ's load was easy, and his burden light, so she thought that it would feel good to get these things off her soul, and she heard that he was the only one who could take them from her.

That bag was exceedingly heavy, so she had to pack the other suitcase just as full to balance it out. In the second suitcase she placed all her accomplishments that had given her joy, all her coping mechanisms, all those good things in her life that had carried her through the tough times and the times of sin--including all her good deeds. She wished to place these before Jesus' feet and show him how she had developed her talents. As she walked out of the town towards the place where she knew Jesus was, through the woods, across meadows, through brambles and over fences, her bags became increasingly heavy, until she began to have to stop periodically to rest.

Finally, she arrived at a wide creek, with only a plank spanning from bank to bank. She could see Jesus on the far side of the creek, but she was

afraid to cross. Eventually, when she had rested her arms to carry her luggage and she felt strong, she set out across the plank, wary of every step, and at that very moment, Jesus began walking towards her! Now she did not know what to do. Jesus would be meeting her halfway and there wasn't room for both of them plus the luggage on that small, makeshift bridge. Furthermore, she would want to shake hands with Jesus, of course, and she couldn't decide which bag to drop. She did not want to drop her bag of failures into the creek, because she heard that those could only truly be gone if Jesus took them upon himself, and she didn't want to drop her bag of successes, either, because what if Jesus thought that all she had in her life were failures? She began to cry. She almost stopped and turned back, but Jesus was coming near, and she could see the welcoming look in his eyes. Unable to decide which bag to put down and with no room to place them on the plank . . . she stopped dead in her tracks and looked up at Jesus. He gave her the answer without saying a word. Both of his arms were extended to her, waiting for a hug. She dropped all her luggage and was welcomed home.

Conversion is not just examining your past and trying to do better. It's much more exciting and fulfilling than that, because it's a process of freeing ourselves so that we may cling to Christ and live today in fellowship with him. And so it also means letting go of our successes as well, especially when they're our ways of helping us deal with our sinfulness or make us feel better; we need those things less and less as we accept grace as the guiding force of our lives. And so when we cling to Christ, we release ourselves to suffer, die, and **rise** with him, and although we will fall and fail again, we know from past experiences with conversion that flying to Christ is the only way to rise with Christ:

“I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me.”
(Galatians 2: 19-20)



Rise up!

And they will know that you are Christians.

Rise up!

You shall be known by your Faith, not your failures.

Rise up, my friends, and live!

Anyone can love.

Anyone can hope.

And everyone will fall to sin.

But the faithful one will rise and live.

The faithful one will live.

For you are not dead but asleep.

You are not drowning but swimming.

Not falling but flying--

Flying to the breast of One who Loves like no other.

To the arms of One who hopes like no other.

To the feet of One who rose up first.

*You fly to him and you kneel at his feet, cleansing them
with your tears and anointing them with oil.*

And Jesus weeps.

Because he would do the same for you (John 13:5).

*You give up all control and clutch to him, you rise again
to be who you truly are, you rise again to love and serve, you
rise again to face the joy and the pain, you rise to live. And
then you feel like flying. You fly like a dove with the lilies of
Resurrection in your feathers. You rise up to live.*

Chapter four: The First Letter of John to the College Students

To college students everywhere, from your friend and brother in Christ, may the grace and peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all in your witness to other students, faculty, staff, and members of your community. I long to visit you all, bring you tidings, and share youthful gifts of the Spirit with you, in order to know you and your ways of worship, praise, and service. But the Christian mission has so expanded that it would be impossible to see you all in person, so know that I am with you in spirit through this letter. I have sent you writings before, but I now speak to you more directly about certain issues that are of great importance to the Christian church on college campuses everywhere, specifically those here in the United States, issues that I cannot fully address, of course, but that can only be explored by searching the grace within your hearts more deeply. Keep searching and praying!

From my own experiences with you, though, I can tell you that you are a source of hope to me in my heart. I give thanks to the Lord for all of you and pray unceasingly for your spiritual well-being. The future of the church and the witness of Christ on earth depends on you all, you earthen vessels of the Spirit, of every shape and size, every race and language. The future of Christ on earth depends on your unity and variety!

Now it is well-known that there are sects and divisions among you, just as there have been among your parents before you. You must open

your eyes and contemplate the roots and consequences of these. Look closely at the source of those divisions. What is their cause? Is it that Christ created them, so that his church might be severed? Is it that the Father created them so that he might divide his children into smaller forces? Then how do these divisions happen? This may be because of our natural variety in ways of thinking and culture, which sometimes weakens our unity, but it is mostly because of the frailties of humans, our prejudices towards others who do not look, think, or pray as we do.

Through prejudice, Satan has been prowling among you, fostering anger and disgust between the brothers and sisters of Christ. When you were children you did not see the divisions, because your parents sheltered you from them and led you by the hand to your own church, so that you would know your family's way of knowing Christ. That is all fine and good. We are all touched by grace in different ways and we react to God's love differently. You have learned a way from your parents, but let us not forget that this way is only a small part of *the* "Way". Now you are in college, and you see many other manifestations of The Way. You may be scared and afraid, uncertain if you are truly following Christ. Give yourselves to the Holy Spirit, who will bind you all together in love. Do not think from this, though, that you should not correct one another when you are not following the Gospel--sometimes a group's ways of furthering the mission will stray from the message of Christ. Your variations should

not cause a division in the mission, nor should your fear or self-doubt produce anger or distrust of your brothers and sisters. To guard against that, you should come together in prayer, encourage one another, and witness to one another, and then Christ will witness to your campus. Christ needs you all.

There are some of you who say that the work of the Lord is to open the Word to all seekers, some who say the work of the Lord is to give love to those who are in need, thus showing the love of Christ through example, and some who say God's work is to deliver sinners to righteousness through praying for them and showing them faith. So be it. These are all works of the Lord, but we must remember that the work is not ours but the Lord's. Don't quibble over tiny disagreements, or over "who is doing God's work," or which set of beliefs is the right way, for all you believers who are walking in the Light will be furthering the Light of the Lord, and the Kingdom is furthered by Christ working through all of you as the Body of Christ. Walk in the Light, follow the path together, pray together, encourage one another, don't slow the mission or argue like children of the darkness. This was the way of your ancestors who created the sects out of their own natural inability to make their ways conform to the ways of the Spirit. Conform yourselves to the Holy Spirit, and you will be brought together magnificently by the power of God. Don't forget the beauty and the strength of your diversity, and the marvelous way which all of the parts

of the Body of Christ work together, and don't discount the part, or role, that's different from yours.

Christ is calling all of us together, and those of us who desire unity in the mission are doing the same: Calling all Christians! Calling all Christ-lovers! We need prayers and we need dreamers, we need seers and we need doers, we need Dorothy Days and Max Lucados, we need the center and we need the fringe, we need Catholics and Protestants and we need unity, we need us and we need you--We need the hands and the eyes of the Body, the tongues and the ears, of course, but we also need the smelly and dirty and unappreciated parts of the Body, the armpits and the kidneys, the bladders and intestines, the parts of the Body that aren't afraid to live in the dirty work, aren't ashamed to go unnoticed. For if "all of the Body were the mouth," and even if that mouth spoke prophecy with grace and elegance, and ate of nothing but the Bread of Life, then where would the rectum be? Closed up and forgotten, lost and forsaken by the pious mouth, trapping the Word of God inside the Body and not letting it out until that once-fulfilling Word turns to poisonous refuse and eats away at the Inner Cavity. We would explode from within! We need people of all sexes and sexualities, all races and nationalities--we need digesters and processors, speakers and excreters, pilgrims and prostitutes, outcasts and invalids, Saints and sinners. We need all these from the past and the present if we are to keep moving and growing as Christ's Body, extracting all the

spiritual nutrition we can from the Word. We need a new start and an ancient beginning, we need futurists and traditionalists, we need socialists and transcendentalists . . . We need our needs . . . We need to know our needs as well as we know our gifts. We need to figure out who “we” are. We need to realize that we are the needers and the needed. If we weren’t here to need, then no one would be needed. We need the steadfastness of the Creator, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the love of Christ. We need Christ. We *are* Christ. And Christ needs us.

Christ certainly needs all of us for his mission, wants all of us to be his friends. But the growth that you have had at college is useless if it means your family and home are still starving for the Spirit, or your home community is unaware of the way Christ has touched your life. You may have found Christ on your campus, but Christ doesn’t just belong there. Your mission is beyond this campus: enrich your faith communities and your denominations with the joyous fellowship that I know you have found! It has been my weakness, too, to be mute with God’s Word around my family and friends from home, even though I allow the Spirit to explode from my whole being in the safe zone of my community on campus. This is spiritual selfishness, a sort of gluttony, and I also long to be released from this through the power of the Holy Spirit, which waits to anoint me for discipleship. I remember the joy with which I first began to overcome my fear of witnessing to my own family of the joy which I had

found in Christ Jesus. I prayed for the chance, and God gave me the opportunity to share. Oh, what a glorious day to feel reunited with my parents and siblings in Spirit and in Truth, to be “coming home” at last. But I know that there is still work left to do there, and there are friends and community members at home that I have been running away from, unfortunately.

I am convinced, though, that in order to witness beyond our campus, you need some sort of strong fellowship on campus that provides you spiritual and emotional support. In my own Catholic tradition, the church has been a vehicle for growth, and this growth has made sharing my faith with my family and friends easier, because of the common experiences and community that we share. It is the idea of church as a vehicle of Christ on earth, a vehicle which the Body of Christ is driving, that I wish to express now, hoping not to dwell on doctrines of the church to which I belong, but focus on the ways that college students may benefit from and contribute to their own faith communities. In short, church for me is a “we”, and all believers are “a universal community of Christians who journey towards salvation together and seek to reflect Christ’s presence in our world.”

“A Universal Community of Christians”

“This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.” (John 15: 12-14)

And so we are a circle of Christ’s friends *if* we love one another: that’s his commandment. And the circle of love that connects us is an ever-widening, ever-expanding circle of love that flows through us, who are only empty channels constantly being filled. And we are called to be channels for that love so that it reaches out beyond our friends, to our human family, beyond our church and our college to everyone we meet.

And the love of Christ will prevail in our hearts.

And so with it being a circle, our church is a round table, where everyone is an equal in the eyes of Jesus, our Savior:

“At that time the disciples approached Jesus and said, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ He called a child over, placed it in their midst, and said, ‘Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me.’”

(Matthew 18: 1-5)

We are like a round table of children, like the little kid’s table at Thanksgiving time, where everyone spreads love around as they pass around the salt of the earth--we are children of the Light.

And the love of Christ will prevail in our relationships.

And so as friends of Jesus we stick up for him just as we would any other friend, we inform the uninformed, we bring our relationship with

Jesus to the center of our collective lives, and we are proud be Christian, to be a witness of what he has done for us.

And the love of Christ will be exposed to the world.

And in this we are never alone: Jesus says to us as he does to his disciples in Matthew 28:20, “Behold, I am with you always, till the end of the age.” Think of what Christ has done for all of us--there is something in that which makes it worthwhile to stick together as a church.

And the love of Christ will bind us together,

“who journey towards salvation together.”

And so we are all redeemed by Christ with no need for justification, but we are constantly working towards the salvation that Christ offers us endlessly. We work out our salvation, like Paul says, with “fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12), but with a joyful spirit. And we do this in many ways, but first and foremost we talk to Jesus together and we listen to Jesus together--this is the essence of prayer and worship.

And the wisdom of Christ will teach us.

And we begin to realize that we are a Christian community, not a group of individuals. We examine our prayer and realize that Christianity is a “we and God” thing, not a “me and God” thing. Our prayers always show us that, especially the prayer that Jesus taught us: “Our Father”, not “My Father,” and so we are able to share this with any Christian, because wherever two or three are gathered together in his name, there he is in our

midst. We look beyond our own disgust, perhaps with our church at home or elsewhere where the people don't seem to have the same relationship with God that we have, and we realize that Christ is present there too, listening, guiding, reaching out to their hearts.

And the wisdom of Christ will guide us.

And so we come together in the Eucharist, in Worship services, in however you wish to call our group celebrations of Christ's love, and we remember, we celebrate, we believe. We remember that although Jesus was present in the bread and wine at the meal, he was also there at the dinner table too. We celebrate that mystery more than anything, and we remember that we are the body that he talks about, and that eating that body goes far beyond just chewing up a piece of bread, and that we are called to celebrate his presence in our daily lives, our everyday eating of the Bread of Life.

And so the wisdom of Christ will heal us,

“who seek to reflect Christ's presence in our world.”

And we are constantly reminded by our struggles that this is the toughest part, but we cannot stop at prayer and Sunday worship. We can't! Millard Fuller (director of Habitat for Humanity International) reminds me of this when he says that we don't come to church to “flick on our lights”-- there's plenty of light in church--we come to charge up our batteries so that we can be lights to the world. And each of us are reminded of the

special talents that we are called to share with the world, not just our campuses or hometowns. We are not called to sit on our haunches!

And then the peace and justice of Christ will prevail on earth.

We are constantly reminded that we have a long way to go. we don't live today as Christians once did:

“The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common. With great power the apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great favor was accorded them all. There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need.”

(Acts 4: 32-35)

This isn't American society, is it? This isn't “grab all you want, we'll make more,” this is witnessing with “great power,” this is caring for and working for the poor and down-trodden and good old fashioned selflessness, because God is the one who owns all of us. We have a long way to go, but Christ always goes before us, we don't bring Christ along with us: he will meet us there.

And the society of Christ will prevail on this earth.

Despite the road ahead and our past failures, we must not be discouraged. Gil Bailie, Christian anthropologist, says that in 20,000 years, we will be seen as the EARLY Christians: we're still figuring it out! And isn't it wonderful to have a future ahead of us, such a grand future where our churches live up to their ideals of equality, and where Christians

live up to their dedication to humanity. And, as Dorothy Day reminds us, we avoid the sense of futility, because “everything is possible in God.” The building of the Kingdom will be slow, and it will come by God working through us, not us working in God’s name, and our actions will be multiplied beautifully by the Holy Spirit, like the loaves and the fishes. It will come in God’s time.

And the hope of Christ will prevail on this earth.

And we anticipate the kingdom of God. Some say that it will bring mass destruction, and some say it will be the end, but for those in Christ it will be the beginning, and the stripping away of our old selves and a living in the Light. And we will truly see ourselves as the body of Christ, and just as John the Baptist heralded the Messiah, we will we heralded in the same way. We *are* the kingdom of God. We are the subjects of the kingdom and the infant body of the kingdom, waiting to be born into our struggling world. And we are the future of our churches.

In your college years, you are in training. You are only building a résumé of Faith. As a Christian, your primary vocation is to walk with God and witness to the Truth, and you do that through whatever your secondary vocation is, whether it’s as a teacher, doctor, accountant, scientist, writer, pastor, or lawyer. You are in training now, not for a job or a career, but a vocation. Fill your spiritual résumé with prayers and reflections, with Bible studies, friends, and living scrapbooks of what God

means to you. If your résumé does not include these Holy things, what kind of vocation lies ahead of you?

This is the problem of those who aren't in the habit of living their Faith wherever they go or whatever they do in college. They try to fill up a paper résumé with dozens of experiences to have a full slate of qualifications for the job market. The résumé-building that I'm speaking of is the training of your soul, your heart, and your mind for a faithful life and a beautiful future. In pursuit of a thick paper résumé I wasted my first two years of college, until I began to walk with the Lord and my earthly qualifications became far less important to me. Now I am in training for a different sort of qualification. As Paul says, I am in pursuit of an "imperishable crown" and so I "drive my body and train for it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified." (1 Corinthians 9: 27).

Live your Christian life with pride every second of the day, in the classrooms and in the libraries, in the churches and in the bars, at dances and in the stadiums. Do everything for God's glory, not your own future, since you have indeed seen saved through your Faith in the dying and rising of our Lord Jesus Christ. Live it! Love it! Be a Christian student and train for a Christian vocation in the work-place, in marriage, and in family life.

Build up the résumé of your soul with prayer and devotion to Christ's Word, so that it may be recorded deep in your heart. The wise Christian is the one who has studied Jesus, knows His words by heart, and practices the Love that He professes. The "educated" Christian student is like the scribe who inquires of Jesus, "Which is the greatest of all the commandments?" (Mark 12: 28) and then listens to the Word as Jesus explains that unconditional love to God first and our neighbors, second, is the commandment of our God. The scribe understood that Jesus was right and that love is "worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices (Mark 12: 33). And so this dedicated student of the Word is "not far from the Kingdom of God" (Mark 12: 34).

It is well-known that many of your fellow college students are being turned far away from the Way and the Truth. They seek truth, but are disappointed with the teaching or witness of their parents or other Christians that they see. So they seek fulfillment in trinkets or new-age gadgets, or try to reason out Truth with their heads. But how will they come to know Truth if you do not show them that you are saved? They need to know of the good things of Christ our Savior, and those will be known through miracles--through the miracle of your loving others selflessly in a selfish world, through the miracle of your living a Christian life on a college campus. Those are the miracles through which Christ is revealed today. Ask God to fulfill those miracles in you.

Live life with a smile and a gentle heart. Bring the love of Christ with you in your heart, in your service to your community, in the way that you act and rejoice in the blessings of life. Lift up one another when you are down, remember to be always welcoming and open-minded to the seekers among you. Many among you are seeking silently but are overlooked if you are not sensitive to their needs. They are checking you out to see if Christianity is real. So, live your Christian life always, witness to all with your life, be especially consistent with your actions and your living out of the Gospel of Love.

If I sound too demanding, friends, take heart! These words are not to burden you, for the beauty of Christ is that his grace and Holy Spirit are the powers that will witness to your campuses and your families. You are only a vessel, so just be happy to be there when it happens. Also, take heart when confronting your failures at conversion, for we know well that “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26: 41). Risking conversion and failing is a trial that may discourage us at times, but you know that trials are important, just like tests are important in our classes to see what we’ve really learned and to demonstrate how strong our study tactics are. Spiritual trials will inevitably come, and it is in our failures that we are reminded of our need for grace, of our need to turn more humbly to our God. For without our low points, what would be the point of grace?

Trials are our growth, our seed of hope when we think everything is perfect, when we lose sight of the imperfection of this world and begin to despair at what life has offered us--they remind us that the next world only is perfect, that our flesh and our lives here are transient, that our human nature is weak and there is something remarkably better in the promise of Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior, Teacher and Messiah.

Conversion is tough even though it brings us closer to Christ, because it always means leaving something behind, ripping a desire for a worldly pleasure from our heart and replacing it with love for Christ. But Paul reminds us that in our weaknesses, we are made strong. (2 Corinthians 12:10). That's very difficult to understand sometimes, but in our weakest moments, grace must come in all the more abundantly, and so we are strengthened to a greater extent. This is true with one specific area of our lives that college students have many questions about, the question of sexual immorality. Although I think that issues of sexual immorality too often take precedence over more important moral issues, I will take some time to relate my thoughts on this topic now. The way that we are made strong in our sexual weakness is that in situations where uncommitted sex becomes more of a possibility (those situations involving two young, un-married Christians who are very much in love), Christ's grace abounds all the more through the love that they show for one another, *if* they keep Christ at the center of their lives.

Although the beauty of the love that two young people have for one another can easily be justified as a reason for uncommitted sex, as Christians you can be assured that the love of Christ is far more beautiful. Christ will be faithful in fulfilling you with that love; even when you feel like you've failed, you can remember that Christ is reaching out to you, and you can always begin to use your passion towards one another to not only be compassionate towards Christ's people but co-passionate towards Him.

I know from experience that this is a very difficult step to take. But remember the promise of greater satisfaction which Christ offers you in the loving sacrament of marriage, and hold that sacrament dear to your heart, that in "marriage a man and a woman shall become one flesh" (Mark 10:7). Jesus did not ignore the Hebrew tradition of marriage, he made it relevant by proclaiming the sanctity of the union of matrimony. As man and woman become one flesh in marriage and join together their temples of the Holy Spirit, so too do they share their trials and their joys as they journey towards salvation together, growing in Faith and raising a family in Christ's love. That is beautiful love, and it is meant to be the fruit of our God-given sexuality.

Yes, our sexuality, too, is a gift from God, "a relational power because it bonds us with others in affection and mutual care," as Au Wilkie claims. As a power given by God, we must not become slaves to it or

repress it (just as we shouldn't do that with any of our other gifts from God) but find blessed, productive ways to express love using this power. Remember that abstaining from sex without a focus on God's grace is not chastity but sexual repression. The fruits of chastity can be love, service to others, healthy friendships, healthy dating relationships, and eventually a committed marriage and happy family life. The fruits of sexual repression can be insecurity, distrust, adultery, rape, and repression. If God is at the center of your relationships, then chastity before marriage does not only make sense but is spiritually fulfilling.

When you grow closer to a boyfriend or girlfriend, the relational power of your sexuality is going to become stronger. This is only natural; otherwise, we would have no drive to marry or raise families! It's tough, sometimes, to remember that our sexuality, as Christians, is not the center of our relationships, God *is*. Christian couples who are really serious about following God's plan will sit down and talk about their feelings towards one another, instead of either rushing into something or repressing everything. In this way, by remaining open to each other about the sexual aspect of their love, they can learn to channel their relational power of sexuality into living a fantastic Christian life together.

As both celibate and married Christians, we "glorify God and become more like our Creator when we create the loving, other-centered relationships which give us such human satisfaction and personal

fulfillment” (Wilkie). Part of the power to love others comes from our relational power of sexuality, and so praise God for this remarkable gift! Seek the Lord together as Christian couples, and listen to the inner stirrings of your heart when you are quiet with the Lord or reflecting on the Word. You will find the answers there, not in this letter, because I represent just one feeble opinion. You will find both the answers to your uncertainties and the fulfillment to your longings in the love of Christ Jesus, our Lord of the Love that rules all earthly Christian relationships, through the good times and bad. Christ’s is the Love that lasts forever.

Finally, my friends, as I leave you, I ask you to rejoice together with loud cries for the good things of the Lord, as you are known to do. You are the energetic youth with *new life* in Christ. Celebrate it! But in the same way do not become attached to loud celebrations, since you are not worshipping cymbals and drums but adoring the Almighty, ever-living God who *gives* you good times, delights, and joys. So don’t neglect quiet prayer together, for the Spirit moves in many ways, through loud electric guitars and through silence and reflection, through the cheers of a stadium of people and the hushed tears of a lonely brother or sister, through the glories of the natural world that surrounds us and the sacraments given to us in the Word. Rejoice in the Lord always, in these many ways, and I pray that your exuberance and energy will be used to glorify Christ’s name on campus and beyond to all the nations!

Chapter Five: Self-denial and Grace

“Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it.”

(Mark 8: 32-35)

“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”

(2 Corinthians 12: 9)

Self-denial is a difficult topic for many college-age Christians to approach, perhaps because we are still in the process of “finding ourselves” and figuring out what our contribution to society will be, and maybe we don’t feel it’s time to “be unselfish”. I must admit, though that I never felt I had “found myself” as a Christian until I began to search for real reasons to practice self-denial and I experienced the fruits of having the Holy Spirit help me deny at least some of my selfish wants and desires. I’ve come to understand that self-denial without self-esteem or grace is not mysticism but masochism, while self-denial *with* a recognition of the presence of grace in our lives is the most magnificent thing I’ve ever experienced, and it gives me reason to want to spread Christ’s love wherever I go.

I used to see self-denial as a mandate, or something that I was just supposed to do, but now I feel most at peace and most connected with God’s grace when I’m denying my needs and abandoning my will to God. I feel that this is important for college Christians, because many of us are trying to find out who we are, and I think that “who we are” as Christians is based on the presence of God in our hearts and in our friendship with

Christ. If these are truly the most important things to us, then an essential part of trying to figure out what kind of people we are is denying our selfish desires and becoming reliant on grace alone. This is why the two verses at the beginning of this chapter are probably the defining truths of my college spiritual journey thus far.

One of the most influential schools of thought in 20th century Western society has been Humanism, and an essential founder of the Humanistic movement was Abraham Maslow, with his famous “Hierarchy of Needs”. The ideas reflected in Maslow’s hierarchy are indeed very humanistic, and so in themselves they are not bad because they promote the life and well-being of the human race, something Christians should undoubtedly be in favor of. But Maslow’s ideals are not Christian ideals, and the influence of his theories *may* reflect some of the reasons why modern-day Christians have little desire to practice self-denial and why they hold the tradition of mysticism in such low regard. Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs” lists the steps of need-fulfillment that one must go through in order to truly find themselves and reach their full potential, or “self actualization”. These steps of needs-fulfillment include physical needs, social needs, and psychological needs, until the human is ultimately freed to “find themselves” and achieve the fulfillment of his or her being.

I’ll admit that for many people in this country and on college campuses who suffer from the emotional and spiritual poverty of a bad

family life, Maslow's needs hierarchy is very relevant. In fact, the process that Maslow outlines is something that we all need to go through in order to be psychologically sound. But Maslow's hierarchy's ultimate goal and Christianity's ultimate goal are very different. The Christian is called to go beyond "self-actualization" to a higher state of being, which is humility, self-denial, and reliance on grace alone. These are big steps, but we are not able to make it without going through a long process of little steps, and the good thing is that we have grace as a companion throughout our journey. Below is a summary of this process, which I call "A Christian's Hierarchy of Needs," and following it is an exposition of each of the seven cycles. I use the word cycles instead of "steps" because these phases (as suggested by the diagram) are generally repeated hundreds of times in our Christian lives, as we jump from cycle to cycle. I would still argue, though, that we need to have gone through cycle two at least to some extent in order to approach cycle three, and so on. Falling back down into lower cycles before advancing to the next phase is natural and beneficial, because it not only suggests that a particular cycle was not fully completed on the first time through but reminds us of our own fragility as a spiritual pilgrim.

A Christian's Hierarchy of Needs

Cycle #7: Reliance on Grace alone: Having denied our needs for everything that is not of God and given back to him everything we have received, we become content with his grace and love alone.

Cycle #6: Self-denial: Rejoicing in our blessings from God and our personal growth, we are freed to love & serve others. As Christ did, we offer up all that God has given us in loving service to others.

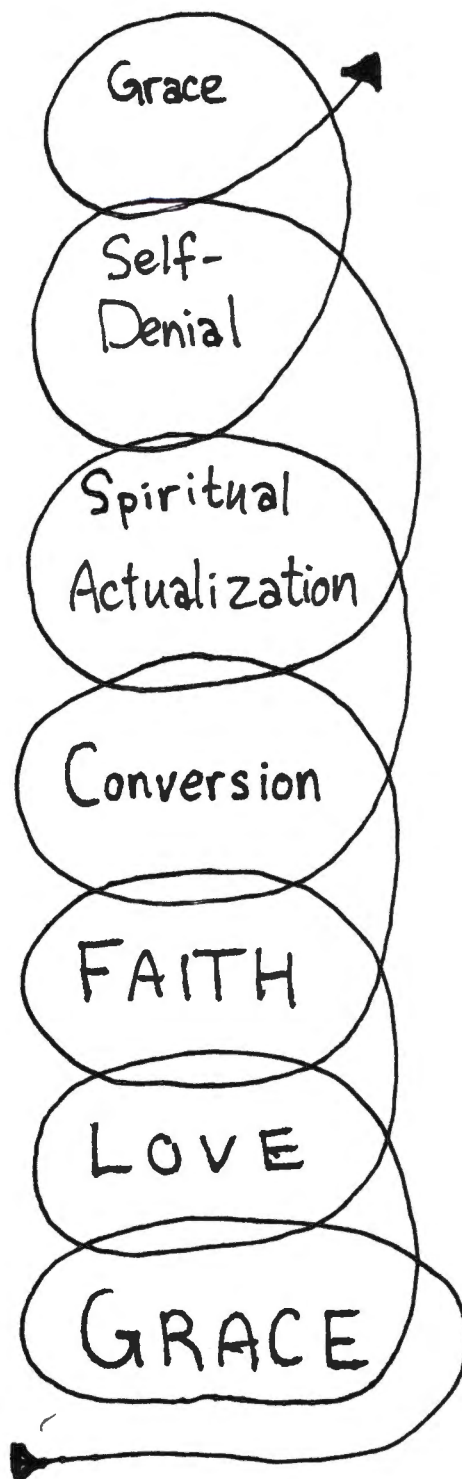
Cycle #5: Spiritual Actualization: Through our failures at conversion, the disparity between our spirit and our flesh becomes real for us. But, we also come to recognize that God loves us although we are sinners, and so we forge on toward the goal.

Cycle #4: Conversion: Faith in the teaching, healing, suffering, dying, and rising of our Lord Jesus Christ strengthens us to ask God to help us turn from sinful lives and obey the law of love.

Cycle #3: Faith: We develop and deepen our faith in the salvation of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, which has been working in us through the love we have received from other servants of Christ.

Cycle #2: Love: We receive loving nourishment from other "earthen vessels" of God, who help us grow physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Cycle #1: Grace: God loves us and creates us in his image. Without grace, our existence and our quest to "find ourselves" would be pointless and transient.



Cycle #1 (Grace): Good News! This first cycle is already done for you. It says in Genesis 1: 27 that “God created man in his own image, in the divine image he created them, male and female he created them.” God created us all in the divine image, and so we are called to live as sons and daughters of God. Also included in this phase is the sacramental grace that we receive through Baptism, a religious manifestation of the new life and triumph over sin that Christ promises all of us through friendship with him. A Baptism is a reminder to all those who witness it of the sanctity of human life and the need for all of us to be responsible for nurturing and nourishing the lives of young Christians among us. It was, after all, at Jesus’ own baptism by John the Baptist when the skies were parted, the Holy Spirit descended upon him, and the Father revealed his love for Jesus: “And a voice came down from the heavens: ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’” (Mark 1: 11). Without grace, our existence and our quest to “find ourselves” would be pointless and transient, because the love God had for us was the reason the Messiah was sent to save us from our sins and lead us to everlasting life.

Cycle #2 (Love): This second phase, to an extent, is also not up to us to complete for ourselves. My claim is that we need to receive loving nourishment from other “earthen vessels” of God so that we can grow physically, emotionally, and spiritually. For many people, this love comes from their families or guardians, but not necessarily, since many families

are not nurturing sources of love. It really makes no difference where this nurturing comes from, though, since our family members, like Christ says, are not necessarily flesh and blood, but “whoever does the will of God” (Mark 3:35). This puts responsibility on the rest of us as Christians to provide this love for people who are seeking faith in Christ, so that they may be brought to Christ as well. This is important for us as college students, since we often have classmates who have been deprived of this nourishment at home and are especially lonely and afraid that college is going to be just as disappointing as their home life has been. So we respond compassionately to Jesus’ commandment to love one another as he has loved us, and we provide these students with physical nourishment (if their health is at risk), emotional nourishment (if they’ve never had a friend), and spiritual nourishment (if they’ve never been introduced to the Word).

Cycle #3 (Faith): True Faith, which is the essence of cycle three, is normally only possible if someone else has introduced them to the Word and shown them love and care. Believing in Christ without ever seeking Truth, just because someone has drilled it into you all your life may be only naiveté, not Faith. Faith comes from the desire in the heart, not just the brain, and it can grow in you through having good encounters with other Christians, reflecting on the Word, and paying attention to the inner stirrings of the Holy Spirit in one’s heart. There are as many different

experiences and reasons for Faith in Christ as there are Christians, so I'll leave the explanation of cycle three mostly up to you. We must remember, though, that the Faith we are speaking of is Faith in our salvation through Christ the Risen Lord (see John 6: 34-40). This is what causes us to repent and be baptized with the Holy Spirit and actually transforms our way of thinking and feeling about ourselves, our relationships, and our actions.

Cycle #4 (Conversion): The importance of this cycle is covered extensively in chapter three of this devotional, but it should be emphasized that the positioning of conversion after Faith is very important. There would be no reason to change your life as a Christian if you didn't believe in Jesus' promise of everlasting life. Conversion is a reflection of our Faith, not a means for acquiring Faith. We know from the Gospels, though, that conversion must arise from a conviction of the heart instead of an external adherence to laws or commandments. This conviction of the heart comes from the power of the Holy Spirit. The way Jesus "fulfills the law" is by calling us all to deeper conversion, to a changing of our hearts, by telling us that it's not just killing that's sinful, but anger (Matthew 5: 21-22), that it's not just adultery that's sinful, but lust (Matthew 5: 27-28), and that it takes more than just "cleansing the outside of the cup" when what's inside is "filled with plunder and evil" (Luke 11: 39).

Cycle #5 (Spiritual Actualization): This cycle is the most difficult to define or explain, but it is the central topic of chapters 5-8 of Paul's letter to the Romans. For help in understanding what this is all about, I suggest that you read that letter, as well as chapters 10-12 of the second letter to the Corinthians. Basically, though, it's the stage where we begin to understand that our conversion is never going to reach perfection as long as we're here on earth, living in the flesh. While "self-actualization" in Maslow's hierarchy is the realization of the potential of one's self, "spiritual actualization" in this hierarchy is the realization that we can never reach our full potential without the help of grace, and that we will never be perfect on earth, only after we have been raised up to heaven so that our spirits may live in the Spirit of Christ. As Christ says, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26: 41).

But true spiritual actualization is never a "downer" or depressing, because along with the realization of our own frailties comes a recognition that God loves us despite our failures and we are continually gifted with the grace to continue on the spiritual journey, as long as we're journeying in the right direction, towards fellowship with Christ. Christ, the one whom God sent, does not "ration his gift of the Spirit to those who seek him." (John 3: 34).

Cycle #6 (Self-denial): By having approached the topic of self-denial in this way, I hope to more clearly demonstrate when and where self-denial is appropriate. It happens after all these other cycles because it requires self-esteem, Faith in Christ, and the realization of the fulfillment of God's gift of grace. For self-denial shouldn't lead to emptiness but to a more complete experience of grace: it frees us for full abandonment to God. Self-denial in word, deed, and attitude is essential to Christians who are ready for this stage and have experienced the growth necessary to dive into it.

Self-denial without self-esteem or conversion is masochism and it does not lead to grace, but self-denial in order to more fully achieve grace, as Jesus practiced it by dying for our sins, leads to ultimate glorification by the Father and communion with God. As Jesus says in John 17: 1-2, before he was crucified: "Father, the hour has come. Give glory to your son, so that your son may glorify you, just as you gave him authority over all people, so that he may give eternal life to all you gave him." Jesus' abandonment to God was total, not half-way. And so at this stage, we too must be prepared for total abandonment to God's will. Even if we keep within ourselves the desire to receive something back from God through our service to others--such as fame, power over others, the love of others, or even spiritual pleasures--we are fooling ourselves. That's only half-

abandonment, and it doesn't lead to full reliance on grace, the final and most awe-inspiring cycle that we can experience here on earth.

Cycle #7 (Reliance on grace alone): It's only possible to describe this stage as indescribable. It refers to those parts of your spiritual journey where you feel complete abandon to God and deny your need for everything else, including the comfort of your loved ones and your spiritual insights. You are freed to just do the work of God and contemplate God's peace, and it can be a very giddy or intoxicating feeling. Paul comes to this stage through his realization of his own "thorn in his flesh" in 2 Corinthians 12: 9, when he says that after asking God three times to remove the spiritual thorn in his flesh, God tells him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness". I have had this feeling on many occasions, and it's usually most powerful when I give up reliance on something that I thought I really needed, or when I realize God's grace within me, despite my weaknesses. Hopefully, this "surrender" prayer from St. Ignatius of Loyola can give you some idea of the attitude and feelings that lead up to this cycle, although the feeling itself is so peaceful that it's indescribable.

O God, I freely yield all my freedom to you. Take my memory, my intellect and my entire will. You have given me everything I am or have; I give it back to you to stand under your will alone. Your love and grace are enough for me; I shall ask for nothing more.

St. Ignatius of Loyola

The most important thing I've learned about this "hierarchy of needs" process has been that it demands patience. Grace is present with you at all times along the journey, and if you truly desire patience from God then throughout all the cycles, that grace will give you patience. After having had a taste of the beauty of cycle seven, I know that it's easy to become addicted to that feeling of reliance on grace alone, and want to feel that all the time. But we must be careful of that, because that addiction can discourage us from our true work as Christians, which is to be the Body of Christ to others and spread the well of joy that we have found in God's grace. Our spiritual journeys are bound to have their dark valleys and deserts, and we will need to slip backwards into lower cycles at times in order to see that there are, in fact, peaks, and there are, in fact, still reasons for us to pursue God and ask Him to transform us.

So what does this mean for college students today? Although it's nearly impossible to be at cycle #7 all the time, since we are constantly fighting with ourselves over self-denial, there are certain times in our lives when we should specifically ask for the gift of God's grace. I leave you with a short reflection on the essence of grace and a small collection of "prayers for grace" that are suited to common experiences that most college students face.

Grace State

In God's cupboard we sit, measuring cups, spoons, and bowls of different shapes and sizes, each of us holding a little of something, whether it's compassion, a hug, or a prayer, or something like a poem, song, or parable. Each of us waits patiently for a recipe that calls for us to be used again, and usually it's not a long wait, especially if we make it a habit to sit near the front of the cupboard. Some of us are used more often than others, but that's O.K. It all depends on what the recipe calls for.

The weird thing is, we never seem to hold enough for the job, and yet we are constantly used anyway, and more often than not, God will use someone who doesn't have anything in them at all. When God picks us off the shelf, it's because we're just the right size for the job, and if we aren't already full, he fills us up the rest of the way with grace, that marvelous gift that makes us whole so that we may be used for God's glory.

God's grace fills us, and the wonderful thing is that the more that we empty ourselves, the more grace we receive. God's grace is at the source of our Baptism, our talents, our intellect, our Faith, our love, and our friendship with Christ. Grace is the warm, coming home feeling of eating fresh-baked bread in November, it is the strength that comes through our

weaknesses, it is the essence of our soul, even in our deepest sorrow and grief, it's the only eternal thing about us. Treasure it! Live in it! Glorify God for the grace in our being!

The following collection of “grace” prayers are not meant to encompass the entire college experience, but are meant to be a starting point for students who are seeking a higher-level of awareness of grace in their lives. They are in no particular order.

For Focus When Studying

Dear Lord, guide of all Wisdom and director of the wise (Wisdom 7:15), I praise you with all my heart and mind for the chance to train my mind for your service. As I clear my mind for studying, I lift up to you all the times when I've been distracted while studying, or when I've been discouraged because the subject matter seemed useless or uninteresting. Help me seek your Wisdom, not the knowledge of humans, to not only absorb what I need to know for a test but to discern what is essential for my service to you, and hold that in the special place of my mind where the grace of your Wisdom resides. Amen.

Before a Test

Lord Jesus, as I wait somewhat impatiently before an examination, I am humble before you and ask for the presence of mind that you had in the desert when you were tested by the devil. You were not nervous or apprehensive of the devil's temptations, but instead you used your perfect knowledge of the Word to combat each of the devil's efforts to tempt you. My knowledge is far from perfect, Lord, but with the help of your grace I will have the insight and calm to access the information that I have studied and make the connections necessary to answer the questions fully and honestly. I ask your blessing on me as I enter into this opportunity to demonstrate what I have learned. Amen.

Before Embarking on a Journey

*"The Lord will guard your coming and going, both now and forever."
(Psalms 121: 8)*

Loving Shepherd, Jesus, the guardian of all life, I turn to you now as I prepare for this journey. I know that your Spirit will not allow my way to stray from the safe path, and you will guard me from all evil. Send your grace, please, Lord, upon me that I may be a patient driver and bless everyone on the roads today, so that we may all be stewards of life in your name. That this trip may be fruitful, too, in whatever way you desire it to be fruitful, I ask your grace, O Lord. Amen.

In Lonely Times

My dear friend, Jesus, I believe in your promise that you are with me always, until the end of the age (Matthew 28:20), and I am sorry for the times such as these when I don't feel the presence of your care and love. On a college campus with thousands of other people around me, I sometimes have a feeling of emptiness, a feeling that I know can be filled by you alone. I invite you again, Lord, into my heart. I'm on my knees, Lord, help me now. Release me, Lord, from my depression, startle me with your overwhelming love. Then, Lord, with your grace help me be a vessel of your peace that I may spread your love to others who hunger and thirst for you. Amen.

Before "Going Out" with my Friends

Loving, merciful God, help me be an ambassador for Christ your son as I celebrate tonight with my friends in this lively college town. Whether my friends are Christians or not, I know that I may be surrounded by temptations. I may be not only tempted to do things that I don't want to do, but also to laugh at others or encourage others to sin by feeding into destructive behavior. Bless us all, Lord, and help me be true to your call to live as a child of the light, even in places of darkness. I know that if I am in the Light of your son, Jesus, I will carry that Light with me wherever I go, and I need the strength of your grace tonight to be a vessel of love to believers and unbelievers alike. May I not only enjoy sharing fellowship and good times, but avoid sin and be filled with the gifts of your Spirit. Amen.

As a New Baby in the Family is Born

My soul rejoices in the glory of your creation, Heavenly Father. Your Spirit is upon this new child, and even though I may be far away, I pray that this child and his or her family will be filled with your grace and blessings. As _____ is baptized and brought up in the Christian Faith, I ask for your continued grace to stand as an example for him/her on what it means to be a Christian. Amen.

For Friends or Family in Need

Caring Lord Jesus, whenever I feel afraid or alone, and I cry out to you, you always send me your faithful servants to calm me and bring me back to you. Whenever I am sick or injured, my family and friends pray for you, asking the intercession of your healing power. I know that this is a major part of your plan, and I ask for the strength to be there for others as well, especially with my loved ones in their time of need. I ask that I may be content with being an "unprofitable servant" and rely on your grace alone, which is to be my aid and strength as I go to help anyone in distress. I ask for humility, Lord, that I may not try to solve problems of "fix" people, but only listen with an open heart and provide them the comfort of your Word and Truth. Help me be a "cheerful giver" to whoever needs the help of your Spirit, for I want to be a channel of your peace. I ask your continued strength and healing power to be upon my fellow Christians in need, so that our fellowship and my imperfect attempts to comfort them may be only a reflection of your love for all of us. Amen.

Praise for a Beautiful Day

On this campus of concrete and bricks, I often don't appreciate the beauty of your creation and wonders of life. But I praise you, Creator God, and I praise the awesome power of your Holy Spirit, which not only formed this marvelous day but also touched my heart and opened my eyes to your glory. Whether it comes in the form of a greening rain shower, a cleansing flurry of snow, a blizzard, or the warm, welcoming sunshine, your power fills the earth and enriches my life. I stand in awe of your glory! Alleluia!

For a New Relationship

Loving Lord Jesus, we praise you for the gift of "each other" in our lives. We are strive to show each other the love and care that is only a shadow of your love for us, and we pray that we may seek your presence and your grace in each other, since grace is the most attractive part of us. Remind us constantly, Lord, as we grow in passion and love for one another, that our bodies are temples of your Holy Spirit, so that we will treat each other with the respect and dignity that is deserving of all your children. Bless us, Lord, help us to learn from each others' gifts and talents a more complete understanding of your grace, and let us discern the reasons why you brought us together in your love. Whatever the road ahead holds for us, Lord, teach us how to love and serve you together, so that our relationship may be a sign of your love. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts, Lord, for the gift of each other, and we stand here, excited, before our unknown future together. Amen.

Discerning a Career

There are so many options, Lord, as I try to envision my future. I wait patiently and I admit that I truly do not know where I'm going. I try to put it all in your hands, but it's hard not to worry, or not to wonder all the "what if's", when everyone around me seems to be plotting out their ideal careers. I only want to follow the movements of your Spirit, and to serve you wherever I am, and I know that with Faith, I will be led down a career path suited for your service, and I know that your grace will accompany me wherever I go. If it is your will to reveal the next step of your plan for me, Lord, then I am ready, but if not, I will be here. I will be here while you go ahead of me. I will be here forever, inside this body. I will be here, because I know that your plan for me is perfect, and it will mean doing what I do best, and what gives me joy. I will be here to serve you, please show me the way. Amen.

In Times of Feeling Persecuted

They chide me, Lord Jesus, for my devotion to you, and I feel empty and down-hearted by their lack of Faith. I want to defend you with all my heart, Lord, but I know that I am not able to do that apart from your grace. Your grace and gift of witness to me is all I need to proclaim your love on this campus, and it will only be done if my life is also true to your Word. I praise you, Lord, for the chance to witness to your love, and I ask for the grace to love those who make fun of me. Amen.

Before "Going Out" with my Friends

Loving, merciful God, help me be an ambassador for Christ your son as I celebrate tonight with my friends in this lively college town. Whether my friends are Christians or not, I know that I may be surrounded by temptations. I may be not only tempted to do things that I don't want to do, but also to laugh at others or encourage others to sin by feeding into destructive behavior. Bless us all, Lord, and help me be true to your call to live as a child of the light, even in places of darkness. I know that if I am in the Light of your son, Jesus, I will carry that Light with me wherever I go, and I need the strength of your grace tonight to be a vessel of love to believers and unbelievers alike. May I not only enjoy sharing fellowship and good times, but avoid sin and be filled with the gifts of your Spirit. Amen.

After a Break-Up

Loving Lord, you are the Master Weaver, and I know that if we were not meant to be together, then it has been revealed truthfully to us. But what if we're wrong? What if we just weren't strong enough to make it work? I am still unsure, confused, and saddened by this loss, and I would be no matter what the circumstances were. We shared love, and it hurts me not to be able to feel that way towards each other any longer. I ask that we may both turn to your Son, Jesus, as a comfort and guide in dealing with this loss, and not turn to imperfect coping mechanisms. I need the friendship of Christ now more than ever. All of my being praises you for the gift of your Son and the gift of the memories that we now have together. I praise you, Father, and ask for the grace to carry on in your love. Amen.

After a Big Project is Finished

Thank you, Dear Lord, Amen! I rejoice in your presence throughout this venture, because I know I couldn't have done it without the gift of your grace, which is the essence of my being and the inspiration for all my work. Whatever the outcome or earthly "grade," I pray that I have glorified you and that I may never seek treasures or rewards on earth, but only fellowship with you. At this time, after being blessed with your grace, how could I desire any more but to stand in awe of you and celebrate the good works of your Spirit through me? I love you, Lord, and seek to serve you in all that I do or accomplish here on earth! Amen, Amen! Alleluia!