



Week Leading up to 2.21.21: Spiritual Desolation and Purification

***{Start with reviewing the previous Meetings Challenge or discuss prior to sharing this week's challenge.}**

Let's Begin: Think about how the challenge went for the last session. What went well? What was difficult?

Opening Prayer:

Begin with a brief moment of silence shaking off any and all distractions or difficulties of the day and remembering that God is always with us.

Read: Mk 1:12-15

After the Reading Conclude with this prayer:

Jesus, as we walk in the desert for the 40 days of Lent, we cry out to You to purify our hearts. Strengthen us in perseverance and protect us against temptation. Amen.

Reflection or Discussion Question:

1. Why do you think/feel Jesus went into the desert and allowed himself to be tempted?

YouTube Video: Finding God in Darkness with Fr. Schmitz (10:32) <https://youtu.be/wXfYjTqfo9o>

Reflection or Discussion Questions: {Leaders: This video has a lot to cover. No need to cover all of the questions as long as the discussion is fruitful. This is a template, so modify the questions as needed. }

2. Was there anything in particular that struck you from the video?
3. What are your thoughts on purgatory? Can you imagine what it is like?
4. Fr. Schmitz talked about three ways of the interior life: 1) Purgative way: purifies us, 2) Illuminative way; great consolation along with darkness/dryness or emptiness, 3) Unitive way; we experience a deep union with God. Have you heard of these before or experienced any of these?
5. Does Fr. Schmitz's description cause you to think differently about desolation and dryness we may encounter in our spiritual lives (e.g. should we fear spiritual desolation)? What benefit(s) could there be from experiencing spiritual desolation?
6. What do you think/feel it means to love God properly (e.g. for the sake of who He is and not for the sake of His gifts)? Do you think/feel that it is possible to do so while living on earth?
7. Fr. Schmitz says that the Lord will give us the strength to push the boat into the water. What are some specific ways that you think/feel we can cooperate with God that would help to strengthen us with perseverance needed to overcome spiritual desolation?

Session Challenges: {Choose one, two, three or all }

- Just as Jesus sacrificed in the desert, determine your Lenten sacrifices for prayer, fasting, and almsgiving; if you have not done so already.
- Sin can cause barriers in our life to God, consider going to reconciliation to create a clean slate and open the doors to spiritual consolation.
- Deepening our relationship with God can be a struggle at times and perseverance is needed. To build the virtue of perseverance, consider one area in your spiritual life where you have failed in the past. Make a commitment to re-implement this spiritual goal and rather than focusing on failure, try focusing on learning from the attempts and making needed adjustments to persevere.
- Take time in prayer and thank God for the times in the past when you may have felt spiritual desolation. Be bold and ask him for courage and strength to walk with Him as He wishes to continue the purification process. Be honest about your fears but let Him know that you trust Him to proceed gently and you wish to love Him for who He is and not the gifts He gives.

Closing Prayer: (Leaders: We recommended offering time during the closing prayer for participants to offer personal intentions.) *Dear Jesus, help us to see past our fears of darkness and spiritual desolation. Fill us with a genuine desire to know You when Your consolation is not present and to look deeply into Your loving gaze. We thank and praise You for who You are! Our Redeemer, King, Savior, and Friend. In Your name. Amen*

{Optional additional Readings} Sunday Reading 1: [Gn 9:8-15](#) Sunday Reading 2: [1 Pt 3:18-22](#)

Additional Information: Video Link on Purgatory referenced in the video above:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GnwDDsN6ZfM&list=PLeXS0cAkuTPpJ6j3eH59WudJhJ4q1tpwH>



Week Leading up to 2.28.21: Vision

***{Start with reviewing the previous Meetings Challenge or discuss prior to sharing this week's challenge.}**

Let's Begin: Think about how the challenge went for the last session. What went well? What was difficult?

Opening Prayer:

Begin with a brief moment of silence shaking off any and all distractions or difficulties of the day and remembering that God is always with us.

Read: Mk 9:2-10

After the Reading Conclude with this prayer:

Just as Jesus was transformed, we wish also to be transformed into the people You call us to be. We submit to Your will; mold us into the Saints You call us to become. Amen.

Reflection or Discussion Question:

1. Even Jesus was transfigured when He went to His Father. Do you feel/think God can transform you as well?

YouTube Video: Developing a Clear Vision in Life with Fr. Schmitz (7:12)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2O4Ffgl6cWs&t=1s>

Reflection or Discussion Questions:

2. Have you ever had a vision to accomplish something and taken steps to implement that vision? Was it exciting, scary, empowering, stressful? Did you do it alone or with others?
3. Have you ever felt that you waste time or that you're drifting through life aimlessly? Have you done anything to make changes if/when you realized this?
4. When was the last time you spent time with God asking Him what His vision for your life is?
5. Do you believe that the devil tempts us to waste our time or are we solely accountable for how we utilize our time?
6. Fr. Schmitz indicates that first we need to have a clear vision and then make decisions on how to make the vision happen. What suggestions would you offer to someone that has a difficult time making decisions that require change?
7. What would it mean for you to live a life full of meaning? What would that look like?

Session Challenge:

- Make this a Lent you will never forget and implement these steps that Fr. Schmitz recommended:
 1. Ask God to clearly place a vision on your heart of what He wants you to look like in a year. Write down what He tells you and what this version of yourself would be like. Also, consider how you would feel if changed by this vision.
 2. Next, consider what decisions you need to make to work with God in implementing this vision. What are the current obstacles preventing me from reaching the vision?
 3. Take one positive step this week that would help you to become the person God has created you to be.

Closing Prayer: (Leaders: We recommended offering time during the closing prayer for participants to offer personal intentions.)

Dear God the Father, You ask us to give ourselves fully to You so that we can be transformed. May we follow Your son, Jesus' example on how to live lives full of meaning. Give us the courage to say "no" to the obstacles that keep us from having a clear vision of who You call us to be and protect us from the devil's temptations. We call on all the angels and saints in heaven to intercede for us that we may become fully alive in mind, spirit, and deed for You. In Your loving name. Amen

{Optional additional Readings} Sunday Reading 1: Gn 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18 Sunday Reading 2: Rom 8:31b-34



Week Leading up to 3.7.21: Commandments

***{Start with reviewing the previous Meetings Challenge or discuss prior to sharing this week's challenge.}**

Let's Begin: Think about how the challenge went for the last session. What went well? What was difficult?

Opening Prayer:

Begin with a brief moment of silence shaking off any and all distractions or difficulties of the day and remembering that God is always with us.

Read: Jn 2:13-25

After the Reading Conclude with this prayer:

We thank You, Jesus, for clearly showing us an example of God's justifiable anger. God the Father has given us commandments that help us to understand how to properly live. Open our eyes to how we offend You, dear Lord, so that we may repent and worship You properly. Amen.

Reflection or Discussion Question:

1. Why do you think Jesus was so angry about what was happening in the Temple area?

YouTube Video: Bishop Barron on the Ten Commandments (13:07) <https://youtu.be/pFemAFXCO9Q>

Reflection or Discussion Questions:

2. Was there anything new or interesting you heard from Bishop Barron's talk about the commandments that you would like to discuss?
3. What do you think/feel it means to worship? What do you think/feel it means to worship only God?
4. Do you think/feel there is a difference between worshiping God in an interior way versus with your faith community?
5. What does the second commandment "Do not take the name of Lord Your God in Vain" mean to you?
6. Why do you think/feel Bishop Barron says that loving your neighbor should begin with those closest to you (e.g. parents, siblings, children)?
7. Do you feel that actively following the 10 Commandments would be transformative? Was there a particular commandment that spoke to you?

Session Challenges: {Choose one, two, or all}

- God calls us to listen to Him to be transformed. God gave us the 10 Commandments to know Him and to become like Him. Memorize them this next week. For a list of the commandments, please use the link referenced on the next challenge.
- Use this guide to reflect on the 10 Commandments and identify where you struggle: <https://mycatholic.life/catholic-prayers/examination-of-conscience/>
- Review your day and ask yourself how often you attacked, undermined someone, or spoke poorly of someone else.

Closing Prayer: (Leaders: We recommended offering time during the closing prayer for participants to offer personal intentions.)

Dear God the Father, You have given us commandments to follow so that we may know You better and learn to overcome the weaknesses in our human nature. Open our eyes to the sins we commit and give us repentant hearts so that we may turn to You more fully and be transformed by Your redeeming love. Amen

{Optional additional Readings} Sunday Reading 1: Ex 20:1-17 Sunday Reading 2: 1 Cor 1:22-25



Week Leading up to 3.14.21: Why did God become Man?

***{Start with reviewing the previous Meetings Challenge or discuss prior to sharing this week's challenge.}**

Let's Begin: Think about how the challenge went for the last session. What went well? What was difficult?

Opening Prayer:

Begin with a brief moment of silence shaking off any and all distractions or difficulties of the day and remembering that God is always with us.

Read: Jn 3:14-21

After the Reading Conclude with this prayer:

Dear God the father, we thank You for Your unwavering Love. You have so graciously given us Your son, Jesus, our Savior and Redeemer in a world full of darkness. By His shining light we can now see more clearly. Shower us with Your grace, which we need to live lives that bring us to eternal life with You. Amen.

Or

Consider doing an imaginative prayer exercise found on the next page.

Reflection or Discussion Question:

1. What do you think/feel this verse from the reading today means "But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God."?

YouTube Video: When God became Man, Everything Changed with Dr. Andrew Swafford (6:23)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytpubDwajnc>

Reflection or Discussion Questions: {Leaders: This video has a lot to cover. No need to cover all of the questions as long as the discussion is fruitful. This is a template, so modify the questions as needed.}

2. What do you think/feel is the difference between atonement and acquittal? Which would offer greater healing?
3. Dr. Swafford explains that one of the reasons that Jesus came was to make us partakers in God's Divine nature. What does this mean to you? Do you find it difficult to believe that God loves you this much?
4. How has Jesus been a model for you or what difference has your faith in Jesus made to your life?
5. Do you have an example to share where God offered you healing through reconciliation? Were you transformed in any way from this healing?
6. Dr. Swafford shares in the video that the Lord meets us in the present moment where time and eternity intersects. What do you think/feel this means?
7. What suggestions can you offer that you have found help you to more fully share in Christ's risen life?

Session Challenges: {Choose one, two or all}

- Refocusing our minds back to God through self-sacrifice can help us to enter more fully into God's Divinity. Evaluate how you have been doing on your Lenten sacrifices. Re-commit to them if you need to.
- Consider how much more of the Divine life you want. Write down the deepest desires of your heart and a habit that you could implement this next year that would draw you closer to God's heart.
- In prayer take 10 minutes to spend with Jesus and ask Him to share with you how much He truly loves you. Next, ask God if there are any sins holding you back from fully sharing in His risen life. If you haven't gone to reconciliation yet this Lent, consider doing so to more fully feel God's love. Refer to this reflection on the 10 commandments to help you prepare: <https://mycatholic.life/catholic-prayers/examination-of-conscience/>

Closing Prayer: (Leaders: We recommended offering time during the closing prayer for participants to offer personal intentions.) *Dear God our Father, You have allowed us to share in Your Divinity through the pure sacrifice of Your son Jesus. As Easter draws closer, may we continue to turn away from the darkness and toward Your light. Amen*

{Optional additional Readings} Sunday Reading 1: [2 Chr 36:14-16, 19-23](#) Sunday Reading 2: [Eph 2:4-10](#)

Optional Imaginative Prayer – 4th Sunday of Lent Year B

Source: <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/arts-faith-lent-fourth-sunday-imaginative-prayer-exercise-2/>
- slight modifications made for use in ESG.

To Prepare – Estimate 10-15 minutes. Show the image from the link above before starting. Ask participants to pay attention to the posture of the two people sitting and hold the picture in their mind as you begin.

The union in openness of body and mind and heart that is prayer begins with attention to each.

First your body: Sit upright, legs crossed or not, feet on the floor or not, lower back pressed against the chair. Breathe.

Now the mind: As you are able, let these words spill through the mind and down your spine into the earth. Let your thoughts puff away with each breath. As new ones come—knotted as they are with joy or pain—hold them like wounded birds. Set them aside to heal. Breathe.

And the heart: Vulnerability means *able to be wounded*. Of course, there is resistance. Notice it. With your breath and with energy, pull back the vines and push open the gates. Breathe.

Tilt your chin up to the heavens and, with eyes open or closed, look back at the One who gazes at you with great affection. Breathe.

Demanding Depth

Let's begin...Nicodemus is an influential man, a ruler amongst his people. He has something to lose by coming to Jesus, the man who overturned the tables in the Temple, a man who brings miracles and causes conflict wherever he goes. Not yet ready to risk coming to see Jesus in the light of day, Nicodemus instead comes at night.

- *What is it that makes Nicodemus take the risk of coming to see Jesus?*
- *Have you been fascinated by someone, drawn to them despite consequences?*
- *How do you imagine Nicodemus feels as he walks familiar roads in darkness on his way to Jesus' house? Is he nervous or excited?*
- *How does the night air feel to him? Can he see the stars? Does it take courage to announce his presence as he arrives at Jesus' home?*
- *How does he feel as he walks into the room? Is he expected? Welcomed?*
- *What is Jesus like as he slips off his sandals and steps forward on the mat?*

Having begun the conversation with Jesus by proclaiming what he knows of him—that he is “a teacher who has come from God”—the last words we hear Nicodemus speak take the form of a quiet question: “How can this be?”

- *Alone in the lamplight, seated next to him, what questions would you like to ask Jesus?*
- *Does he listen to your questions? Does he hear?*
- *In words or gestures, in imaginations or memories that bubble up within you, in feelings that stir in your heart—in any of these ways—does he respond?*
- *Does he reach out to take your hands? Is there an image that arises in response to your question? In a moment of quiet, trust the response that comes.*

The Jesus we come to know in John's Gospel is unsatisfied with shallow relationships. He demands depth from us would-be disciples. It's this desire for depth and this endless desire of the Lord for friendship with us that lead him to speak so clearly of light and dark and of judgment in the words of Scripture we hear today.

- *How does Nicodemus respond as Jesus asks for more from him? How do his whispered responses sound?*
- *Is he grateful for such an invitation? Excited that the one with whom he is fascinated desires depth of friendship with him?*
- *Or is it fear that leaks from Nicodemus into the shadowed room? Coming to the light will have consequences, and he is a man with responsibilities. Is Nicodemus afraid of what will happen, what will be asked of him, if he accepts this invitation to love?*
- *What of you? What stirs inside you as you speak with this Jesus who is unsatisfied with simply being an acquaintance? How do you react to his relentless love?*

Speak with him. Speak with him about any hesitations, any joys you feel. Speak with honesty about what has happened in your prayer. You were invited into his home during the night, so speak with him as close friends do in the darkness. We will pause for a minute or two in silence now.

Concluding Prayer

Glory be to the Father,
and to the Son,
and to the Holy Spirit.
As it was in the beginning,
is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.

Please open your eyes.

Do you feel calmer? Is there anything you would like to share with the group that came to mind?



Week Leading up to 3.21.21: Dying and Bearing Fruit

***{Start with reviewing the previous Meetings Challenge or discuss prior to sharing this week's challenge.}**

Let's Begin: Think about how the challenge went for the last session. What went well? What was difficult?

Opening Prayer:

Begin with a brief moment of silence shaking off any and all distractions or difficulties of the day and remembering that God is always with us.

Read: Jn 12:20-33

After the Reading Conclude with this prayer:

Dear Jesus, help us to understand how to die to self just like the grain of wheat so that we, too, will live to bear great fruit. In Your Holy Name. Amen.

Or

Consider doing an imaginative prayer exercise found on the next page if you didn't use one from the previous week.

Reflection or Discussion Question:

1. Jesus indicates that He is troubled in the reading today. What do you think/feel is troubling Him? {Verse for leader reference: *"I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name."*}

YouTube Video: Should Catholics Fear Death with Jeff Cavins (6:08) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-FG-IJ89pg>

Reflection or Discussion Questions:

2. Be honest, do you fear death?
3. What does dying to self mean to you? Does it cause you to think about death differently?
4. Do you think/feel there is a difference between dying at the end of our lives and dying to self daily?
5. Do you have any additional thoughts on the analogy of the grain of wheat dying?
6. Jeff Cavin indicates that death can have great value. Have you ever experienced great value from a death or when practicing dying to self?
7. Do you have any examples of how you could practice dying to self or have done so in the past?

Session Challenges: {Choose one, two or all}

- Practice dying to self. Think of one thing you can do daily to practice dying to self and, as you do it, say the name of Jesus internally.
- Pray the stations this week: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJF9XjG4Wko>
- Watch the movie "The Passion of the Christ" by Mel Gibson or read [Mk 14:1—15:47](#) to ponder and identify with Christ's dying. Pray for an open heart willing to sacrifice and bear fruit through Christ's name.

Closing Prayer: (Leaders: We recommended offering time during the closing prayer for participants to offer personal intentions.)

Dear Jesus, You have shown us the way with the model of your sacrificial life. As Holy Week draws near, may we enter fully into the understanding of Your death and resurrection. Just as the grain of wheat needs to die to bear great fruit, we live in great hope that we may fully embrace Your example of sacrificial love. May we learn to die to self daily so that we may also bear great fruit in Your Name. Amen

{Optional additional Readings} Sunday Reading 1: [Jer 31:31-34](#) Sunday Reading 2: [Heb 5:7-9](#)

Optional Imaginative Prayer – 5th Sunday of Lent Year B

Source: <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/arts-faith-lent-fifth-sunday-imaginative-prayer-exercise-2/> - slight modifications made for use in ESG.

To Prepare – Estimate 10-15 minutes. Show the image from the link above before starting. Ask participants to pay attention to what is falling from the hand of the sower and hold the picture in their mind as you begin.

It can be difficult to let go of the golden seeds we have collected with care and saved for planting in anticipation of spring. The ground of our hearts may be covered with snow making it difficult to let them go. It can be difficult to let go of the golden seeds we have due to our fears. We may feel that it is still too cold to let them go. Prayer requires release. And release requires a great courage that allows the body and mind and heart to open and to be still. We begin with attention to each.

First your body: Sit upright, legs crossed or not, feet on the floor or not, lower back pressed against the chair. Open your hands. Let the seeds fall or rest gently in them. Breathe.

Now your mind: As you are able, let these words go through you like seeds go through the cold air, down your spine and into the earth. Let your thoughts puff away with each breath. As new ones come—knotted as they are with joy or pain—hold them like wounded birds. Set them aside to heal. Breathe.

And your heart: Vulnerability means being *able to be wounded*. Of course, there is resistance. Notice it, and then kneel in the cold, black dirt, and tuck the seeds deep into the cut soil. With your breath and with energy, push them in. Open your heart. Breathe. Tilt your chin up to the heavens and, with eyes closed or looking at the image, look back at the One who gazes at you with great affection. Breathe.

Seeds

Let's begin...Like Van Gogh's sower or like Jesus in the Gospel, in the scarcity and threat of winter we hold close what was given to us in the summer: the memory of a time we were loved; the security and calm of companionship; our lives as they tick along. Perhaps these are our golden seeds, remnants of an abundance that has passed us by.

- *Where are you in the scene? Are you the sower? An observer?*
- *Notice how the ground feels under your feet as you walk the rows. What warmth does the light bring?*
- *Notice the sower's face as he pulls the sun-burnished seeds from his purse. What do these weightless kernels mean to him? How does he feel as they fall from his hand?*
- *How do you feel? What seeds do you hold? What have you held close to protect it from the cold?*
- *Can you pull those seeds from your purse?*

It can feel impossible to let go of what we have been given, to release into the crusted ground what has brought us life. It requires an outrageous courage, an irrational trust in a still-dead world to believe that what dies produces fruit.

Even more, the frosted skin of the soil must be slashed for the seeds to be planted. They must enter the wound.

- *How does it feel to imagine turning over your hand?*
- *Do the seeds carry the golden light as they fall?*
- *What is it like as they enter the furrowed ground?*

But perhaps it is not we who sow. Perhaps it is the Lord who sows and we who are the field.

- *How has God prepared this cold ground for the gift of these seeds? What is God placing within us?*
- *How does it feel to be warmed by the setting sun? Is there any opening to what God is attempting to give?*
- *Are there wounds that you would like the Lord to plant seeds of hope within?*
- *Can you ask for what you desire?*

Ours is a God who sows before the setting sun, who sows before night falls. Speak with the Lord now about what has happened in your prayer. Whether you have felt drawn to watch or to sow or to be a recipient of the good seed, speak with the Lord about what has happened, as one friend speaks to another. We will pause for a minute now in silence.

Concluding Prayer

Glory be to the Father,
and to the Son,
and to the Holy Spirit.

As it was in the beginning,
is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.

Please open your eyes.

Do you feel calmer? Is there anything you would like to share with the group that came to mind?



Week Leading up to 3.28.21: Hope and Holy Week

***{Start with reviewing the previous Meetings Challenge or discuss prior to sharing this week's challenge.}**

Let's Begin: Think about how the challenge went for the last session. What went well? What was difficult?

Opening Prayer:

Begin with a brief moment of silence shaking off any and all distractions or difficulties of the day and remembering that God is always with us.

Read: Mk 11:1-10 {Entrance reading for Palm Sunday }

After the Reading Conclude with this prayer:

Dear Jesus, You are our true King. You are the reason for our hope! May we turn to You in times of great fear and times of discouragement knowing that You fully understand our suffering. We wait in anticipation to be with You in eternal glory. Amen.

Reflection or Discussion Question:

1. Did you find anything in this reading of particular interest?

YouTube Video: Role of Hope in Holy Week with Fr. Schmitz (8:03)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sgbQJsS8uE>

Reflection or Discussion Questions:

2. Have you ever experienced a time of great fear or discouragement without hope? Have you ever felt hope in a time of great fear or discouragement? What was it like? Where did it come from?
3. Can you think of a time you turned inward to your own self confidence like Peter did rather than hope and trust in God? Why do you think/feel we do this?
4. Fr. Schmitz indicates that hope is something you have to fight for. What does this mean to you?
5. What do think/feel is the difference between Judas' denial and Peter's denial of Jesus? *{Helpful note: openness to God's love and their response to God's mercy}*
6. How do you know that Jesus is really with you?
7. Fr. Schmitz defines hope as trust in another extended into the future. Since true hope is based on a relational trust what are ways we can practice hope or support one another to trust God?

Session Challenges: {Choose one, two or all }

- Think of people in your life that you have real relational trust in. Thank them for their relationship with you and say a prayer to God for thanksgiving for having them in your life.
- Pray the stations this week: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJF9XjG4WKO>
- Enter into the journey with Jesus this Holy Week by attending the Triduum Masses either in person or online. At these Masses, consider how you can better serve others in your life and thank Jesus for making Himself truly present in the Eucharist and being the reason for your hope.

Closing Prayer: (Leaders: We recommended offering time during the closing prayer for participants to offer personal intentions.) {Optional song to play before closing in prayer: Matt Maher's "Lord, I Need You" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gS9e0nxHP-w> }

Dear Jesus, as we enter Holy Week, we turn to You in great sorrow for the times we failed to serve You and our neighbor. It brings us such great sadness when we consider how our sins place You on the cross. Even though we deny Your love by sinning, You still willingly sacrifice Yourself for us. In great humility we ask for forgiveness and Your mercy. You have restored our hope of eternal life with You through Your resurrection and we offer great thanksgiving for Your boundless and eternal love. In Your Great Name. Amen.

{Optional additional Readings} Sunday Reading 1: Is 50:4-7 Sunday Reading 2: Phil 2:6-11