

Bible, Prayer and Intimacy with God  
Summary of Talk presented at Called to Lead Conference  
July 13, 2006

Today I wish to reflect with you on the Bible, prayer and intimacy with God. Two important events in the last two years have helped to form this talk. The first was the desire that I have had in my heart for a number of years to do a silent 30-day retreat using the Ignation exercises, where the primary text is sacred Scripture. I had hoped to do it while I was a priest, but every time I had set aside time for the retreat, something else interfered. When I made the reservation in 2004, I gave my desire to the Lord, "If you really want me to make this retreat, then you make it happen—it is up to you, Lord—to make sure that I am there for the full 30 days." During that retreat I learned to listen to the Word of God more fully with my heart. The three forms of prayer—vocal, meditative and contemplative—were very much a part of the retreat. But it is contemplative prayer that is the desire that most of us have—union with the Triune God.

Saint Theresa of Avila reminds us that contemplative prayer is when two friends speak to one another. They come together in love (CCC 2709). Or contemplative prayer before the tabernacle, as put by a peasant in Ars, whose heart was formed by the Cure' de Ars, is "I look at him and he looks at me" (CCC 2715). During the 30-day retreat, you spend a minimum of four one-hour prayer periods with different scriptures and you work through the entire life of Jesus Christ. If you have a rigorous director, he will give you a fifth hour in the middle of the night. Mine was at 2:30 a.m. It was during that retreat that I came to know the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; to enter into deeper intimacy with the three persons in the one God; to learn more fully about Mary and Joseph's tender care for me, their son.

The second formative event happened last October at our regular clergy days in Fargo. Sister Timothea Elliott, a Scripture professor at St. John Vianney Theological Seminary in Denver, came to Fargo and reflected with us on the Psalms. She invited us at that time to read the entire Bible throughout the year. It was again something that I had desired to do. I had never read every book of the Bible from the beginning to the end. When she gave us a diagram for reading the Bible liturgically, it spoke again to my heart. I have my Licentiate in Sacramental Theology. I have always loved sacred Scripture and the liturgy. I decided, "I'm going to do this." Beginning December first, and for the past eight months, I have been reading the Bible each day, slowly and prayerfully working through all the books of the Bible. I have read them not to prepare a homily, not to look at them critically, but to allow once again the Word of God to speak to my heart, to read them quietly, to rest

with them.

Three words have stood out for me as I have read over the last eight months—the word *love*, the word *mercy*, and the word *heart*—because of how frequently they are mentioned. Sacred Scripture reveals God's deepest desire for the human person. God has created man and woman in his image and likeness. God, who in the words of St. John “is love,” creates man and woman in and for love.

Sacred Scriptures are God's love letter to man. In the midst of man's rebellion against God, even to the crucifixion of his Son, Jesus Christ, God remains ever faithful, steadfast in his love and mercy. We see that God is steadfast in love and mercy constantly throughout each rebellion; beginning with the rebellion of Adam and Eve, the rebellion of the people with Moses and the golden calf, the worship of the gods of Baal, the worship of false gods throughout the prophets, and then the rejection of his own Son, Jesus, who entered the world. God himself enters the story and human history, revealing himself to us, to the human race. God's deepest desire for the human person is that we come to know him. Even in the ultimate rebellion of the crucifixion of his Son by the human race, the stone rejected is the cornerstone (Mt 21:42; Lk 20:17; 1Pt 2:7), the Father's love and mercy endures. He reveals, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who we are truly called to be as human beings. His love for us is truly eternal!

In the Old Testament, God speaks to the heart of man through Abraham, Moses, the judges, the kings, and the prophets. As one reads the sacred Scriptures, not so much with the mind but with the heart, one discovers that the Old Testament is truly one's own personal story. It is the story of my life in rebellion against God, and of God's constantly reaching in, teaching me of his love for me. I too have worshiped, at times, false Gods. I too have sinned like David. I too have fallen and thought myself alone. But what is far greater is God's hunger and desire for me, for each one of us, for each and every human being. God will leave us free to respond in love. He leaves us totally free as he left Moses, as he left the judges, as he left the kings and prophets, the apostles, Mary, Elizabeth, Mary Magdalene, the Samaritan woman, all were free to say “Yes, we will receive your love and follow you” or “no, we won't.”

In the New Testament, this promise of love and mercy only deepens in the very revelation of Jesus Christ. The truth of the Gospel goes far beyond what any human could ever have imagined or dreamed of—that God himself would enter the world and take on human flesh. Jesus reveals not only that he is Son of God, but he reveals the Father and the Holy Spirit. He reveals to us the intimate

union that we are called into as disciples with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that there are truly three persons in the one God. Even in the midst of the rebellion of the apostles and of their denial of the Lord at the time of his crucifixion and arrest, Jesus continues to love them. Look at how he approaches Peter's denial in the resurrection and the question that he asks Peter. He does not reprimand Peter, but he turns to the question of the heart: "Do you love me?" (John 21:15). And that is the question that he gives to each one of us: 'Do you love me? And believe? And trust in that love?' We see it too in the conversion of Paul. Sadly, we do not see it in Judas, for Judas went the way of despair, not trusting in the love and mercy Jesus had revealed.

The fathers of the Second Vatican Council understood the necessary importance of sacred Scripture in one's relationship with God. They encouraged frequent reading of sacred Scripture, saying that it would provide us spiritual vitality and help us to enter into the relationship with Jesus Christ to which we are called. The fathers of the Council boldly quoted St. Jerome and reminded us: "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Jesus Christ" (Dei Verbum 25). And we as Catholics, sadly, at times are ignorant of sacred Scripture, of the living Word of God, of the words of truth and life that Jesus Christ speaks to us (Jn 8:31-32 and Jn 10:10).

In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in the section on Christian prayer—the fourth pillar of the Church—it presents to us the importance of understanding the human heart and its relationship to prayer in the words of Therese of Lisieux. "For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy" (CCC 2558).

My dearest sisters and brothers, humility is absolutely essential to prayer, recognizing that all good comes from God alone. Only God can give us the "good", can give us the "holy", and in humility we receive those gifts. All that is good, all that is virtuous, is gift, including intimacy with God. Humility allows us to persevere. All of us at times of prayer will experience darkness, dryness, distractions. Even in our human relationships we can at times experience that. Yet what is important is the act of the will, the act of love itself, to persevere and to endure those times, to embrace those times, and to trust in the Lord.

Humility will work against a lack of faith or a laziness about prayer, where we think, "I'll get my hour in on Sunday" or "I'll only do this much prayer and that's enough" or "it is my work." As Americans we can be conditioned to think the work of prayer is mine and not God's. In prayer, the work is always God's first. We respond to God's initiative. Sacred Scripture is his work, not our work. It is his revelation,

not our revelation. It is important for us to pray always for a deeper faith, to have that longing and that desire of the heart, to keep our hearts always ready to receive the Lord. Our stance is one of receptivity to God's love.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of the close relationship expressed in sacred Scripture between prayer and the heart. "In naming the source of prayer, Scripture speaks sometimes of the soul or the spirit, but most often the heart. According to Scripture, it is the *heart* that prays. If our heart is far from God, the words of prayer are in vain" (CCC 2562). The Catechism then goes on to state, "The heart is the dwelling-place where I am, where I live; according to the Semitic or Biblical expression, the heart is the place 'to which I withdraw.' The heart is our hidden center, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others; only the Spirit of God can fathom the human heart and know it fully. The heart is the place of decision, deeper than our psychic drives. It is the place of truth, where we choose life or death. It is the place of encounter, because as image of God we live in relation: it is the place of covenant" (CCC 2563). My sisters and brothers, listen to the richness of what is stated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on prayer and its relationship to the heart as revealed in Scripture. As one reads the paragraphs of the Catechism, one cannot help but recall the words of St. Augustine in his *Confessions*: "My heart was restless until it rested in you." For us in the modern world, even more so because of our busyness and all of the distractions, the same holds true. Every human heart will be restless until it rests in God. And to be fulfilled, every human heart must rest in Jesus Christ, because he is the only Lord and Savior of the world.

Following the example of Jesus, we are called into intimate union with the Trinity. Our late Holy Father John Paul II, in his apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae (Catechesis in our Time)*, reminded catechists and reminds us today "the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ: only He can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity." Jesus' hunger and desire for you is this intimacy. As leaders, catechists, as clergy or religious, as parents, all are disciples and our hearts must be in communion with the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit if we are to bring others to Jesus Christ.

My dearest brothers and sisters, learn from Jesus and his prayer. He would go off to a lonely place and pray. He would enter into contemplation in the silence of that lonely place. He would participate in vocal prayer whenever, as a good Jew, he went to the synagogue and prayed in the synagogues as he read and taught the Hebrew Scriptures. He would enter into meditation, as he would challenge

the Pharisees and the Scribes using sacred Scripture, and the teachings of the prophets, and the law to help them to come to understand his revelation of the truth of who he was.

At this time, I wish to read a passage from the Gospel of St. Luke which I believe captures the essential relationship between Sacred Scripture, prayer and intimacy with God. I ask you, my brothers and sisters, to put everything down, close your eyes, and listen with your hearts as I read. Place yourselves in the story.

‘That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, ‘What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?’ And they stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, ‘Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?’ And he said to them, ‘What things?’ And they said to him, ‘Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since this happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; and they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but him they did not see.’ And he said to them, ‘O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them all the Scriptures, the things concerning himself. So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He appeared to be going further, but they constrained him, saying, ‘Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.’ So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight. They said to each other, ‘Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?’ And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven gathered together and those who were with them, who said, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!’ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread’ (Lk 24:13-35).

Let us look at this journey of the human heart in the story. We hear of two disciples talking with each other about all the things that had happened in Jerusalem. We can imagine the angst and the sadness that is present in their hearts. All of us have experienced death at some time and we know within our own hearts the struggle when we lose someone who is close to us. Their hearts had been filled with hope that Jesus was to be the Messiah, the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. Everything is dashed. He is dead.

We note that Jesus is the one who first enters the picture. Jesus takes the initiative with the two disciples; he starts the work and conversation with a question. This is important for us to understand as we approach prayer and the reading of sacred Scripture. We must approach sacred Scripture with receptivity. Receptivity is absolutely essential because God is there waiting to meet us. God takes the initiative with Abraham, with Moses, with Ezekiel, with Jeremiah. He takes the initiative with Mary and the apostles. Each one of them receives with openness. God initiates and the human person receives.

The first point for prayer is receptivity—the opening of our hearts to be ready to receive, to say “yes” to the Lord. We must respond as Mary responded. Look at her tremendous humility: “How can this be, since I have no husband?” (Lk 1:34). Imagine the fear she must feel when she is called by a title bestowed on her by God: “Hail! Full of grace” (Lk 1:28). She is filled with wonder. “What does this mean that I am full of grace?” She has a human mind that is limited, and yet she trusts the words, “with God nothing will be impossible” (Lk 1:37). She bows her head in humility and says, “I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). The receptivity is profound—rooted in trust and humility!

My dearest sisters and brothers, when we pray for the grace of receptivity, we can always ask the Lord, seeking this grace through the intercession of Mary, the Mother of God. Her greatest longing is that we know her Son. When we pray for that grace, we can say, “Lord grant to me the same receptivity as the receptivity of your mother, Mary.” God desires that receptivity for each one of us.

As we return to the story of Emmaus, we observe the response of the disciples is to pour out their hearts to Jesus, which is the second point of prayer. They first look at Jesus somewhat incredulously, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” And Jesus prods them along, “What things? Reveal your heart to me.

Let me know what's really going on inside of you.” Then they pour out their hearts concerning Jesus of Nazareth. They tell the story about his condemnation, about his crucifixion, about his death. They share their hearts. One can taste their disappointment and sadness. All of their hopes and dreams have been dashed. Further, they demonstrate that they really don't understand the resurrection. They are clueless. Yes, the tomb was empty. They found it that way. “But what does that mean? His body could have been stolen.” And even though Jesus had spoken with them about his resurrection, they do not understand. They pour out their hearts to Jesus, whom they do not yet recognize, yearning to make sense of what has happened. In our own prayer, my sisters and brothers, it is important that we too pour out our hearts to the Lord, that we too speak honestly in prayer with the Lord, and bring to him our questions.

I remember the first time that a question popped into my head on the 30-day retreat. It became one of the most important questions that I asked, and it was not asked to Jesus or Mary, but it was asked to Joseph about his relationship with Mary. The response that I heard in my heart was to see all with the eyes of the Father, which became foundational for my retreat and still is today.

When we turn away from the noise of the world and open our hearts to the Lord, asking the questions that come to our hearts, the Lord will respond. The Lord will speak the truth to our hearts as he spoke to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. We see that Jesus chides them somewhat. He tells them, “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe.” He points out their lack of faith and the slowness of their hearts. He too at times might chide us in our prayer, and that is okay. He is trying to open the eyes of our hearts. He is calling us to a deeper faith and trust in him.

Jesus then begins to take the disciples on a journey through salvation history. He begins with Moses and all the prophets, and interprets to them all the Scriptures, the things concerning him. The Scriptures he interprets are the Jewish book; the Old Testament, as the New Testament has not been written yet. The Old Testament points to the new and paves the way for the new. That is why it is so important for us to know the Old Testament, also to pray with the Old Testament, because there is only one destination to which it leads us and that is to the Messiah, to Jesus Christ. The disciples listen attentively. They listen well to the Lord. They listen not only with their ears, but more so with their hearts.

The third point essential for us in prayer, especially when we pray with Sacred Scripture, is to be attentive to the Scriptures, to be attentive to the relationships, to be attentive to the Word of God

speaking to me personally. I do not approach it as some dry book of history. I do not approach it to see how things were structured. I approach it with a listening heart, with an attentive heart, with a heart that is ready to learn about God's love for me and God's love for all humanity.

The disciples have listened so attentively that they do not want this man to leave. They still do not recognize him and they say, "Stay with us." They want to hear more. They want to explore more. Essentially, Jesus has them hooked, so he remains and goes to stay with them. While they are seated at table, Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to them. We are told it is then that their eyes are opened and they recognize him. Look at their words as he vanishes out of their sight, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?" Their hearts are on fire with a deep love for the Lord. Through the Scriptures the Lord himself reveals to them his risen presence in the midst of the breaking of the bread. It is in the Eucharist that they discover that Jesus is truly raised, that the empty tomb is far more than someone removing a body. It is the gift of eternal life and resurrection, the fulfillment of the promises of Jesus.

What do they do? They rise that same hour. They do not wait and discuss more, but rather they go out immediately. They go to the eleven to speak to them, to let them know what their experience of the Lord has been. The eleven greet them with "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" They share with the eleven what has happened to them and how they came to know him in the breaking of the bread.

Let us now look at points four and five in prayer as reflected in the story of Emmaus. There is always an intimate connection between the Word of God, sacred Scripture and the sacraments, and, most especially, the Eucharist. When we look at the Emmaus passage, we can see the structure of the sacred liturgy, of the Eucharist, that we celebrate. There is the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist. Jesus is the one who gives us that structure. He is the one who reveals to us the sacrifice of the Mass. It is his gift. In every celebration of every sacrament there is the liturgy of the Word that leads us more fully into the sacrament and helps us to understand and receive the sacrament more fully. As Catholics, we are truly blessed with both the Word and the sacrament. The sacraments are a form of prayer that is a gift our God gives to us. Prayer is a gift.

The fifth point of our prayer as Catholics is that it should lead us to go out and to proclaim the good news. We are sent out into the world, into that new evangelization to which John Paul II called us and which Benedict XVI has confirmed. We are to go out with hearts on fire and proclaim Jesus

Christ as Lord. The disciples of Emmaus go forth from their encounter with the Risen Lord to proclaim his resurrection.

Prayer with the sacred Scripture and, most especially, in the Eucharist, is essential if we are to have intimacy with our God. We will receive the intimacy promised by our God as long as we are receptive to him, as long as we make ourselves a total self gift to him, and as long as we have the desire in our heart.

Let us now look at another Scripture passage which helps us understand the desires of the heart of God and our hearts in prayer. In Exodus 33, verses 17 and following, is the prayer of Moses. The prayer reveals his deep desire to know the Lord. "I pray thee, show me thy glory." And he [the Lord] said, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name 'The Lord'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,' he said, 'you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live" (Ex 33:18-20). The Lord then reveals himself to Moses. Today we are more blessed than Moses because we have Jesus Christ, who is the fulfillment of that desire. We cry out like Moses to the risen Lord, "I pray thee show me thy glory." In John's Gospel, Jesus bestows this glory on us with his words -- "that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory" (Jn 17:24). Intimacy, tasting the glory of God, is God's desire for us.

I want to reflect briefly on praying the Psalms, especially for those of us who pray the Liturgy of the Hours. We must make the Psalms our own prayer. The way that many approach the Psalms is often one in which we read them and think, "Well that's swell for David or that's swell for whoever was praying that, but this means nothing to me." When you and I read the Psalms, we must read them in the first person. That is the way they are written, not as someone else's words, but as words, prayers, to be prayed in the first person.

Listen to Psalm 18: "I love thee, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. He delivered me from my strong enemy, and from those who hated me; for they were too mighty for me. They came up on me in the day of my calamity; but the Lord was my stay. He brought me forth into a broad place; he delivered me, because he delighted in me" (Psalm 18:17-19). My dearest daughters and sons, take those words to heart. Do you truly believe that God delights in you? Look at the intimacy to which he calls you. Look at the desire he has for you, for each one of

us. That is why the Scriptures speak of the steadfast love of God.

In Psalm 43 there is the cry of the heart, "Oh send out thy light and thy truth; let them lead me, let them bring me to thy holy hill and to thy dwelling! Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; and I will praise thee with the lyre, O God, my God. Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God" (Psalm 43:3-5). All of us have had that experience of feeling cast down, of feeling disquieted. When we dwell on it, it only distances us from God. But if we bring it to the Lord, as the Psalmist did, if we cry from our heart to have light and truth, we see his tremendous love. "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him."

We can see within the prophet Ezekiel the promise of the Lord to give us a new heart. That is what has happened to us on the day of our baptism. Our God sprinkled clean water upon us and we became clean. "I will give them a new heart, and put a new spirit within them" (Ezek 11:19). All of the promises of the Old Testament are fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

My sisters and brothers, let us now look at Jesus' prayer in the Gospels. Look at his promises given to us, most especially in the Gospel of John and the intimacy that is revealed. "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him" (Jn 6:56). In John 15, "Abide in me and I in you. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you" (Jn 15:4-7). Or in that great priestly prayer of John 17, he prays for our unity with him and the Father. That prayer is powerful. "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me" (Jn 17:20-23). That is God's desire for us. That is his longing. That is the way the world will come to know that our God is truly living in our midst.

The experience of the love of God for us gives us the courage to bring to God our hearts. It gives us the courage to bring to him our sin. When I was on my 30-day retreat I meditated on the prodigal son. I shared with my director after the meditation that my deepest desire was to know all of my sins, all of my wounds, even those hidden faults and hidden wounds, so that I could run to bring them to the Father who would bathe me in his love to forgive and heal me.

In conclusion, we may ask, "How is this intimacy possible, this burning love of the heart?" I assure you

as a bishop, a successor of the apostles, that it is God's deepest desire for each and every one of us to have an intimate relationship with him. This relationship is possible only through the total gift of self, through a dying to self. We see in God this total gift of self first in the Old Testament. It is fulfilled in the New Testament in Jesus Christ. The total self gift of God given to man goes beyond our greatest hopes—in the Incarnation, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and is continued in the Eucharist. God constantly humbles himself, making himself a total gift of self for us. St. Paul recognized this truth of the humility of God in his great hymn to Christ in Philippians 2. God humbles himself in his desire for intimacy with us. We too must have the same desire. As our God makes himself a total self gift to us, so too are we called to make ourselves a total self gift to him. We are called to surrender ourselves to him completely and totally.

My prayer for you is that as you read and, more importantly, pray with the sacred Scriptures, especially with the Gospels, you may discover the depth of the Father's, Son's and Holy Spirit's love for you, and that you will let yourselves be loved as the beloved sons or daughters that you became in baptism. Do not find excuses for God to not love you, for that is rebellion, but allow in freedom each one of the three persons of the Trinity to love you so that, in receiving that love, your hearts may be transformed, your sins forgiven, and the virtues will come to be lived by you personally as you experience in your heart the eternal mercy and love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.