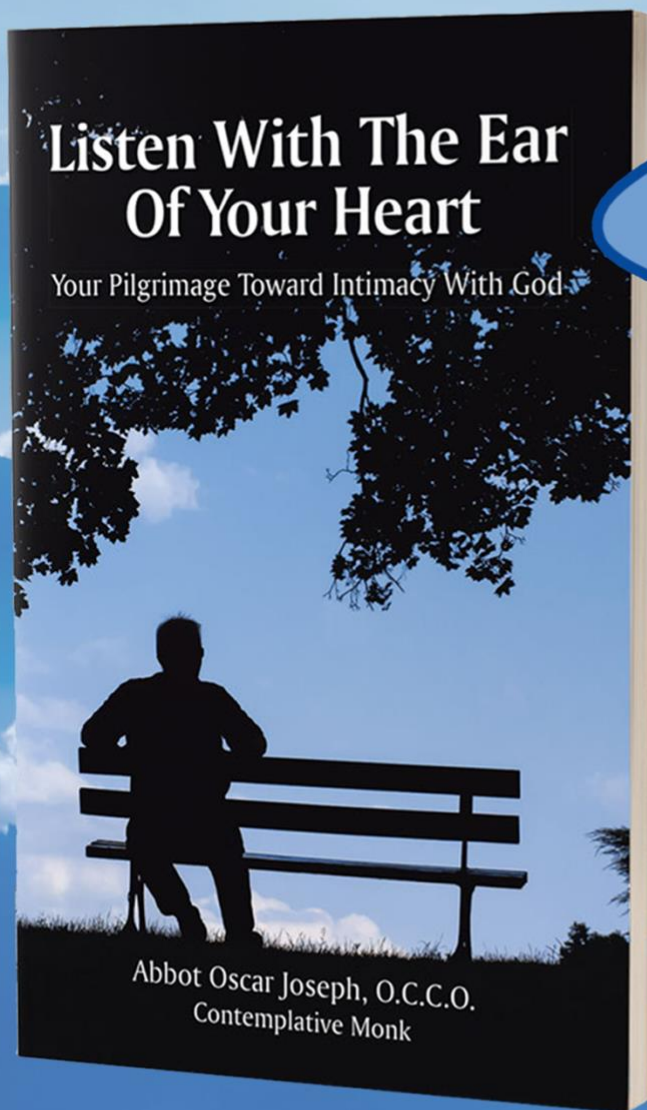


The Abbot Speaks Out

by Abbot Oscar Joseph, O.C.C.O.

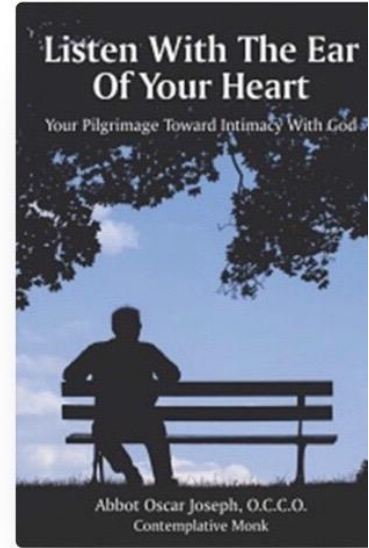
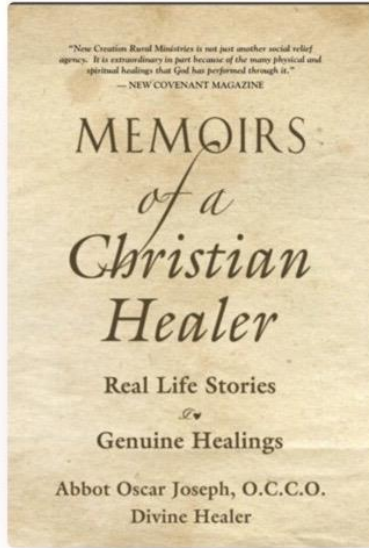
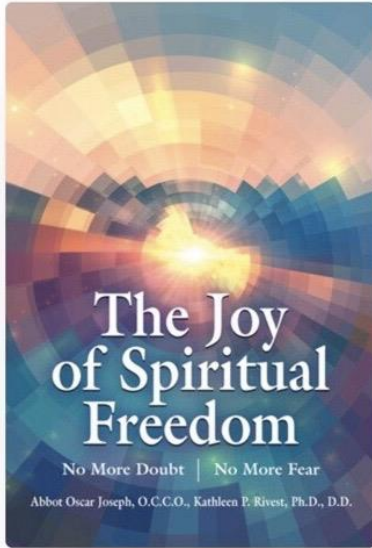
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Dear Readers:

Thank you for joining me on this pilgrimage.

I have received many compliments on this book and have used it to reference Spiritual Direction. I have noticed that people were reading it rather casually and consequently not getting the full benefit. So I have incorporated this companion work to be able to accompany you via the reflections on your journey.

I understand that this is a bit demanding for a novice pilgrim. I assure you that the journey is well worth the effort.

May our Almighty God bless you, keep you from every evil and bring you to everlasting life.

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Acknowledgments

Acknowledgments p. xi.

"Kathleen, the co-author of my life, makes everything happen. She inspires me to experience more love than I ever thought possible."

We have a book inside of us that we begin to write in utero. Its title is "How the World Should Go According to Me." Every positive and every adverse event in our lives was carefully scribed. Every day we direct our lives in ways that conform to the book. When a new event, say from a loved one, contradicts our book, we get conflicted. Now is the time to rewrite our rules to something much more positive. And so Kathleen's love inspires me to experience and give more love than I ever thought possible.

Who are those positive people in your life who have helped you to become a better person? Have you thanked them recently?

Preface

Preface p.xiii.

"Late Friday afternoon, we received a call that my father was about to die."

What has been your experience of death? It is healthy to think of your end to use your life wisely and to the fullest. Your moment of passing is the defining moment of your life. I have been with several people at their deaths. You can tell the difference between a Christian and one who is not.

Preface p.xiii.

"At this writing, I am seventy-three and wish to pass my heritage on to you, the reader."

I would like you to reflect on what heritage you are passing along. Perhaps a good way to itemize your legacy is to write your obituary. There is time to be more, accomplish more, to live more for God than you.

Preface p. xiv.

"I firmly believe that no matter where you are or how great or lowly your life may be that our Gracious Lord is pursuing you. He will not let you go. He wants to have an intimate relationship with you. I hope that I can teach you as I have thousands of others the truth of God's mercy and love."

Please, dear friend, know that your need to be worthy is of NO concern to God. He has made you worthy. I know that being made worthy is challenging to accept. We want to earn what we get. But think about it. How could we possibly do something/anything to get infinite grace and goodness from our Creator?

Getting Over Yourself

CHAPTER 1 – PILGRIMAGE

PILGRIMAGE P.1.

“He has, over the years, been with me at my most troubled times and my most victorious times. During the troubled times, I had abandoned Him. During the most victorious times, I had abandoned myself.”

I remember the moment that I originally wrote the above. I also remembered the truth of my abandoning God, but He was always with me. The thoughts filled me with remorse. Dear friend, please think of your moments of abandoning your Creator and give Him thanks for never leaving your side.

PILGRIMAGE P.1.

“Our Good Lord is always with you. You do not need to have more of God because He is already there. What you need is to recognize His presence right here right now.”

This one sentence filled with truth contains our personal and corporate mission. Spend a lot of time reflecting on this.

PILGRIMAGE P.1,2.

“I have counseled hundreds of people with hundreds of problems, hurts, fears, and anxieties. But all of them were essentially asking one question, “What is God’s will for me?” For them, as for you, that is the question, “What is God’s will for me?”

Ask that question every day in every situation. You will smile more often.

PILGRIMAGE P.2.

“We, you, all of us suffer the universal fears of abandonment and annihilation. Or put in simpler terms, fear of rejection and fear of death. It is easy to understand the fear of rejection. You might even do things out of character to win the approval of others. You might assume the personality or characteristics that your family, culture, employers, and churches dictate are the most acceptable.”

We spend a lot of time, energy, and money trying to earn the approval of others. The rub is that those we wish to please don't have a clearly defined standard for acceptance. They often don't even know who they are.

It would be better to know how God "feels" about us. I often ask my counseling clients to write a description of how God "feels" about them. It is very encouraging. I ask you to do the same.

God told me, "I am a son of God, brother of Jesus, heir to the kingdom now and forever." I am to show my inheritance now through being a prophet, priest, healer, and teacher.

When I remember God's definition of me, I am much less influenced by my weakness of desiring others' approval.

PILGRIMAGE P.2.

"Perhaps you have falsely believed that by having the right job, position, material wealth, and superior intellect, you would be loved and accepted."

Please reflect on your life. How much time and effort have you put into the activities listed above? What were you seeking?

PILGRIMAGE P.2.

"So you put in an enormous amount of energy and time into acquiring these things that rot. One day, you may realize that a lifetime of misplaced effort was wasted. No matter what you achieved or parts you played, you could never be good enough. You never felt safe to live honestly. You have become more like the walking dead."

It becomes vital to know who you are in a relationship with God, not people or achievements. When you know that, you will become your authentic self rather than play the role others have given to you.

PILGRIMAGE P.2.

"God is the real solution. When you know Him well, then you will begin to measure your worth not by how others judge you but by how God judges you. When God looks upon you, He sees who you are. He also sees His Son and the Holy Spirit living within you. When God sees and judges you, He dances."

Imagine that picture. God is looking at you and knowing all of your faults, and He still dances with joy at His creation.

PILGRIMAGE P.3.

"Often, the first persons who taught you not to trust were your childhood principal caregivers. You accepted their beliefs, hopes, and fears. If your principal caregivers were not trustworthy, or if they believed that you were not trustworthy, you entered into the swamp of lack of trust. Your childhood first god was your father. If he was not trustworthy but was mean, emotionally distant, or even absent, then you start believing that God is not trustworthy, will be judgmental, and will not be there for you when you need Him."

The first and most important person in your life is your biological father. Even if your bio-father was always working, never around, was never married to your mother, left or divorced your mother, or you were raised by someone else, your bio-father is still the most crucial first person in your life.

It would help if you recognized your bio father's positive and negative contributions to your life. Invite God into that journey.

PILGRIMAGE P.3.

“Those same walls that protected you also hindered you from transparently approaching God. Even if you grew up in the church, it was easy to hide behind the mask of acceptable behaviors and fancy church words. If you did it well, you might have a chance of being accepted. Consequently, you have become untrustworthy.”

I spoke with one of our monks the other day on this very topic. If we put up walls to each other by whatever method, we are also doing the same with God. Yet, the more transparent we become with God, the more we will find that God is gracious and trustworthy.

PILGRIMAGE P.4.

“Even the church teaches false pieties and pop psychology through teachings like: “God will never give you more troubles than you can handle.” “God is testing you.” “God has given you these troubling circumstances so you can get closer to Him.” All these statements are false. They describe God as a trickster who plays with His people. They hold you back from trusting God.”

I bet that you have heard these false statements and perhaps have even used them. Church, the place that you want to feel safe the most often, is a place of threat and a venue to pretend in order to be accepted. Yes, wherever you go, you have to be alert.

PILGRIMAGE P.4.

“In summary, you want to know the important fundamental question. What is the will of God? You want to be safe, accepted, and loved by God and others. I have given a brief look at what holds you back from obtaining your needs because fundamentally, you trust things that rot.”

Your pilgrimage then consists of discovering and removing the things that rot that you trust but give no support. I would encourage you to make a list continually. If something or some idea doesn't produce genuine love, joy, or peace, then they will destroy you at some point.

PILGRIMAGE P.4.

“An intimate relationship with God is your only solution. In that relationship, you will begin to see how lovingly He looks upon you, His creation. God has created you to be drawn to Him. You are able to understand that God is already with you. You can learn that you are already walking in, with, and through Him. You can feel accepted and safe. You can lead an authentically inspired life.”

Perhaps "you have been made to be drawn to God" helps you know why you are frustrated. You are frustrated because you are fighting against what is natural for you to do. You allow the defense mechanisms that you believe protect you from being rejected by others and distance you from the only real source of safe love. Recognizing that is the first step.

I heard your Christian voice say, "wait, I am a Christian. I love God. He is my Savior. I have already given Him everything. What you are saying does not apply to me." Please listen. Your pilgrimage has just begun. You think you have arrived, but there is much more to do. Keep reading thoughtfully.

PILGRIMAGE P.6.

"That is going to be the first step in your pilgrimage. Get over yourself and just listen."

I have spoken to a number of people who have read this book. They liked it. They couldn't put it down. That is nice, but you can't just read this book. You have to talk to it, argue with it and perhaps even throw it against the wall. Most people don't want to get over themselves. They prefer to stick with their "stuff" even if they know it is wrong. Most people do not truly listen. So dear reader, please slow down. This pilgrimage is well worth the effort.

PILGRIMAGE P.7.

"Your pilgrimage toward trusting in the Lord is a lifelong journey. Your efforts in trusting God are about your pilgrimage toward spiritual and emotional maturity

Following Scripture and the teachings of the Church Universal, you can clear the trees and get rid of the rocks and other debris. You can pull out the tangled roots deep below the earth. Then you would be ready to lay a foundation and pour the concrete. Having built according to the architect's plan, you can begin to till the soil".

Scripture is not that hard to read. Get a translation that is written in modern English. Start with the New Testament. Take your time. The letters that you read after the gospels make perfect sense. If you read slowly and out loud, it will make more sense. If a section does not make sense, it is because someone has told you a lie about that topic area, and you are in conflict. Keep reading slowly. The lies that you believe should die out the more you read, and the more you pray.

PILGRIMAGE P.7.

"God will not only forgive your sins, but He will also guide you back on to a better course than you could have imagined."

A promising sign that you are moving forward on your pilgrimage is that you will begin to see that you are indeed a terrible sinner. This is a good thing to recognize. Talk to God about the sins that come up as they reveal themselves. Ask for God's forgiveness. He is willing and eager to forgive you.

Chapter 2 - Fundamental Steps in Developing Trust

Fundamental Steps in Developing Trust p.11.

“Trying to describe God and the experiences of Him is nearly impossible. The best anyone can do is to speak in metaphors. Metaphors are nice, but they are not always understandable. You want a God whom you can understand. Consequently, you make God into your own image and likeness. That image and likeness are broken and frail.”

Often we give God human characteristics. The Old Testament is full of examples of God behaving and feeling like a human being. He is often described as angry, punishing, short-tempered, etc. God is none of these things. If you read the stories, the bad things that happen to the characters result from their bad sowing, such as being disobedient, not God's punishment.

For many of us, we will need to be retrained to see God as the merciful, loving Father that He truly is.

Fundamental Steps in Developing Trust p.14.

“Your attitude toward the value of church is vitally important. You can experience God in a wide variety of places but none as vitally unique as participating in a faith community. If you find yourself complaining about Sunday worship, the preaching, choir, seating and the person sitting next to you, something is wrong with you. Perhaps you picked the church for the wrong reasons. Typically people choose a church because it is less than seven stoplights from their home, has good programs for children, they like the pastor, music, entertainment, the social hour, or their parents went there. These are all the wrong reasons.”

Create a list of reasons why you picked your faith community.

Fundamental Steps in Developing Trust p.14.

“You may also complain about your church because you bring nothing to the Sunday service.”

I am not referring to bringing something to entertain yourself, such as your cell phone. I speak about your personal prayer time, Scriptural study, and spiritual conversations with family and friends. If Christ is not alive for you daily, He won't be there on Sunday either.

Fundamental Steps in Developing Trust p.15.

“Imagine if your home operated like a domestic church where you pray together with your wife and family who also participate in a local mission.”

That is a challenging statement. But imagine how wonderful it would be if your home were also Christ-centered.

TANGLED ROOTS

CHAPTER 3 LIES THAT YOUR MAMA AND EVERYONE ELSE TOLD YOU

Lies That Your Mama and Everyone Else Told You p.19.

“You might have a specific problem and go to Scripture for a specific answer.”

While Scripture does have many clear answers to the human condition, we need to remember that it was never intended to be an answer book. Nor was it intended to be a history book. Instead, it illustrates how God has formed His people and desires to bring them to Himself. This misreading of Scripture is why a Rule of Life such as The Rule of St. Benedict can help us formulate more clearly how we are to relate to each other and our Creator. Hopefully, our churches also have catechisms, canon laws, etc.

Reflect on the times you have researched the Bible and walked away empty-handed. Those are good illustrations that you expected the wrong things from the book.

Lies That Your Mama and Everyone Else Told You p.20.

“Such euphemisms generally distract you from the real problem.”

What euphemisms have you been taught or used to try to comfort others? None might come immediately to mind but FaceBook is loaded with them. If you read something and walk away thinking, "that was cute," that was probably a euphemism. It would be better to say by way of comforting yourself or others, "I don't know," "God and life are more a mystery than black and white answers."

Lies That Your Mama and Everyone Else Told You p.21.

“A very harmful lie is that God tests you so that you will grow in faith. Let’s say it another way. God brings difficulties upon you purposefully so that you will grow in faith.”

The other day I received an angry note from someone who believed that God was not trustworthy. After all, he wrote, "why would he allow all the troubles in the world?" He was responding to the lies that grew from the above quote. Do you feel his pain? How about your pain when you have experienced what you thought was God abandoning you?

Lies That Your Mama and Everyone Else Told You p.22.

"Pop psychology has infiltrated many churches with a feel-good philosophy. This example is the one I hate the most because it has destroyed many good people. 'You must forgive yourself.' In my thirty-five years of giving Christian counseling to wounded people have witnessed the blood and scares from this lie all too often. It misdirects the Individual to see themselves as the source of healing, not the mercy and love of our Good Lord.

Reflect on the times that you have done this to yourself.

Lies That Your Mama and Everyone Else Told You p.23.

"I have been discussing a loving, merciful God who gives generously and favors His people. I have not made Him the warm fireside cozy friend that you can have a beer with when you feel like it. The prevailing lie is that Jesus is your friend. That makes Him equal to you. It humanizes Jesus to a position of genie to be used for your ends. By making Jesus broken and fragile, He has little to offer. Once again, you have made yourself God."

How many times have you heard or said, "Just talk to Jesus like you would your best friend?"

During one of many seminars on how to pray, an elderly fellow said that he had to take his conversations with God more seriously thanks to the seminar. When I asked what he meant, he replied that he was beginning to see Jesus as the Almighty God, not his buddy.

Lies That Your Mama and Everyone Else Told You p.24.

"By lowering the Mystical to your level, the Mystical is of no value. God must be beyond your understanding or He is nothing."

How do you lower God? Is it how you speak about Him, speak His name in vain, have cute little pictures of Him, or wear a cross around you next as a piece of jewelry rather than a symbol of your allegiance.

CHAPTER 4 WHO IS GOD AND HOW DOES HE OPERATE?

Who is God and How Does He Operate? p.27*"When you know God better, you will discover how He takes loving care of His creation. Scripture, your reliable source, will teach you how God works."*

"Even Scripture says not to forget the teachings of the fathers and that it does not contain everything. Scripture was intended to describe Salvation History and teach faith and morals. Jesus gave the Apostles the authority to continue His ministry of reconciliation and teaching. We can learn more about God through Scripture, historic Church teachings, living a holy life, and prayer.

Prayer is much more than reciting daily petitions and blessings over dinner. It is more than going to Sunday church service. It is raising your heart and mind to God. I will be teaching you about this as you continue reading.

Please reflect on your efforts to study Scripture, historic church teachings, living a holy life, and prayer.

WHO IS GOD, AND HOW DOES HE OPERATE? P.27.

“God is described as always being the initiator of good. You are always the responder to good.”

Let's be honest; all by ourselves, we would only care about ourselves and acquiring earthly things. That is excellent news. Because when we do something spiritual and self-sacrificing, it is because God has already led us to do so.

The question then is, of all that I do, what is really other-centered?

WHO IS GOD, AND HOW DOES HE OPERATE? P.28.

“God even pursues those who are running away from Him and are actually in terrible sin.”

St. Paul wrote that he was strong when he was weak. I often wondered what he meant. At least for me, when I felt as though I had no physical, emotional, or spiritual power, I had to get out of the way and let God do the work. Yes, I said the prayers, got out of myself and acted responsibly, but God, not me, did the work. A far better job than I could have accomplished, even at my best.

Knowing that God pursues the sinner was a great comfort. Not only am I a terrible sinner, but so are you and everyone else even that terrible, stupid neighbor, politician even that pornography addict. Yes, God pursues everyone.

Reflect on your position regarding God pursuing you.

WHO IS GOD, AND HOW DOES HE OPERATE? P.29.

“So please remember that if you even think a good thought or do a good deed, it is because God inspired you. All you did was to respond.”

Remember that time that you forgave your mate even though they hurt you terribly. Or other times that your good thought or deed was far more than you could have done on your own.

WHO IS GOD, AND HOW DOES HE OPERATE? P.30.

“The first Spiritual Law is ‘What you sow, you shall reap’ Some mistakenly call that karma. Let's call it ‘You asked for it, so you got it.’”

Be honest, and make a list of your sowing and reaping, both good and bad.

WHO IS GOD, AND HOW DOES HE OPERATE? P.31.

"The second Spiritual Law is 'Do not judge others.' That quote is often misused. Examples: 'You can't tell me what to do.' 'You don't know me.' Or you use not rightly judging as an escape from responsibility. You are called to judge and speak on a wrong. However, you cannot judge the condition of someone's heart."

How many hundreds of times have you heard or said the above words? You can't judge me. You don't even know me.

Yes, I can judge you. I am called to judge you so that you might change. I cannot judge your heart, motives, emotional well-being, etc. I can and must judge your behaviors to call you to change to good, holy, and proper behaviors. I want to call you into accountability. That means that there is such a thing as universal truth.

A popular phrase is "my truth." If you mean what is honestly you, then okay, but if you think for a moment that you are a source of any truth, you are very wrong. That includes me. That is why I told you where I am getting my information in the introduction.

So how does all the above affect you?

WHO IS GOD, AND HOW DOES HE OPERATE? P.31.

"The third Spiritual Law is 'Honor your mother and your father, and you will do well and prosper. 'You can see the sowing, reaping, and do not judge the condition of another's heart built into this commandment."

Most of us have grown up in less than perfect situations. But if we blame our parents, or anyone else for that matter, for our free will choices, we will not thrive. One author said that we curse ourselves to become like those we have judged. I see the truth in that.

Please describe how you have judged your parents as harmful rather than doing the best they could. How often have you said you don't want to be like your father or mother?

CHAPTER 5 Sin

SIN P.35.

"The purpose here is to experience the forgiveness given to you by Jesus on the cross when He begged His Father to 'forgive them for they know not what they are doing.' You do not know, nor are you capable of knowing, the enormity of your sins, including those little ones like stealing sweets from Grandma's candy drawer."

If you are inclined to minimize your sinfulness, you are not very close to God. The closer you get, the more you will realize who you are offending, and the true enormity of your sins will be revealed.

Later I will provide several examinations of conscience that will help you search for yourself. For now, write down the sins that are jumping out at you. If you believe that you have none, wake up!!

SIN P.35.

"She asked her husband how God could forgive such an unworthy sinner as herself. His wonderfully simple but perfect answer was, 'Because He is God.'

You might have asked that or a similar question. The answer remains the same, 'Because He is God.' You cannot imagine or understand God's love and mercy for you.

You will never be worthy of anything regarding God. The fact is He has made you worthy through His crucified Son. So not only 'get over it' but be joyful for His graciousness to make you worthy."

Walking in the truth of the above is the essence of the Christian walk. Describe your struggle with receiving forgiveness.

SIN P.36.

"This woman was carrying objective guilt. By that, I mean she did something sinful, so she was guilty. That is the case for most of us. We did something wrong, so we are guilty.

Subjective guilt is something far different but also burdens many people. Subjective guilt happens when you judge yourself. You believe that you did something wrong."

This is an important concept. Rewrite in your own words what is written above. Then read on the chapter and see if you got it.

SIN P.38.

"Shame can feel like objective or subjective guilt, but it is neither. Persons who feel shame believe that there is something fundamentally wrong with them. Consequently, they judge themselves as not good enough to be loved by anyone, human or divine. They believe that God would not forgive them."

Have you ever said that you were terrible and that no one could ever love you? Indeed, God would never love you. You are destined for hell.

SIN P.38.

“There are legitimate reasons for divorce beyond the traditional sin of adultery.”

Have you been divorced? Have you thought of being divorced? Why?

SIN P.39.

“Not all marriages are truly Christian marriages.”

Look at the following pages to see what I mean in more detail. Is your marriage a Christian marriage? Why or why not?

SIN P.41.

“I believe also that a Christian marriage must be officiated, witnessed and solemnized by a valid Christian minister who does so in accordance with civil law and the canons of his church. A Justice of the Peace or an online “ordained minister” or any such person, while they might be able to officiate legally, does not have the credentials to officiate a Christian marriage.”

I suspect that this might be upsetting to some. Please realize that Christianity is a community event. If marriage is considered sacred, it must be done within a Christian community. If this is the case and you would like to change it, what will you and your mate do to make your marriage a sacred, truly Christian one?

SIN P.42.

“Masturbation is the tangled root of many evils. I, all too often, hear from parents that their teenagers’ masturbation is just a normal way of discovering their sexuality. Now that’s pop psychology!”

What excuses have you used to rationalize your masturbation?

SIN P.43.

“Sexual intercourse outside of marriage is a form of mutual masturbation. It attacks the dignity of the persons involved and the sanctity of marriage.”

What rationalizations have you used to validate sex outside of marriage, including living together?

Sin pgs.43, 44

“Simply living together, regardless of the reason, will ultimately have numerous difficulties. It diminishes your personal and relational dignity. It is a poor rationalization for using each other. Playing house is not marriage. Living together does not mirror marriage. Your marital vows will immediately make your entire earthly, spiritual and emotional realities different.

Previous to marriage, your negotiations to get along were essentially selfish maneuvers to get what you wanted. It does not resemble a selfless, sacrificial love you willingly give to your life partner. Marriages birthed from these utility relationships are often fraught with insecurities, jealousies, and a decided lack of trust. After all, if you play at marriage, you are liable to be unfaithful when married."

I suspect the above is disturbing and that you could build an argument against what I have said. Slow down and think deeper, and you will find some examples in your premarital life that could have been done better, more intelligent, and with better consequences.

CHAPTER 6 Four Models of Examination of Conscience

FOUR MODELS OF EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

You can repeatedly use the examination of consciences in this chapter.

A nightly examination followed by a prayer of sorrow and repentance is a healthy model.

CHAPTER 7 PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION P. 67.

"One of my great joys is hearing my clients proclaim that they have become different people. They no longer think about or are influenced by what used to control them. They see the world entirely differently. I enjoy hearing couples describe how their marriages that were once painful are now a source of new life. How did they move from serious problems to such a transformation?"

What an incredible transformation! Don't you wish you could do that with the problems that ruin your life? You can do it, but it requires dedication, vulnerability, and, in marriage, the same from your mate. There is no longer a problem if you are married that is just yours. Your mate shares in that also. You should also be open to working with a Christian counselor. This chapter will discuss the transformation process.

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION P.67.

Prayer, confession, and controlling temptations are the first steps.

A difficulty here is that most people who have problems do not have an active prayer life. Yes, lots of daily prayers will keep problems away and help you to control temptations not out of super discipline but out of love for God. Daily prayer quickly leads you to be watchful of your sins and quick to confession and amendment. Reflect on your life and how much you are inclined to do the above. What are your temptations?

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION P.68.

“the person believes that they are bad and unworthy persons. If anyone really knew them, they would most certainly be rejected. Therefore, they can’t go to anyone to meet their needs.”

When you look into the mirror, what do you see? When God looks at you, what does He see?

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION p.68.

“The person who only stops the sinful behaviors, whatever they might be, is still influenced by these erroneous beliefs and consequently is still inclined to repeat to repeat them.”

This is extremely important. Just because you have stopped a particular sin does not mean that you are past it. Unless you change who you are and how you think, the sin will be repeated. Sustaining weight loss is a good example. What has been your experience of the above?

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION P.69.

“True intimacy and ability to listen to God may mean transforming your entire household. The creation of a domestic church would be an excellent beginning.”

Now there is an interesting thought. I bet it sounds like a lot of work. It is not as difficult as it might seem. Having Christ at the center of your home is rather exciting. How might you begin that process? Remember, it is all about new opposite behaviors. You cannot become something new while continuing to do the same old thing.

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION P. 69, 70.

“You cannot trust people until you trust God. That is one more reason why developing an intimate, listening relationship with God is so very important.”

If trust is developed through consistency over time, few people will manage that. God, however, never changes. What are your thoughts on that?

CHAPTER 8 CHRIST THE KING

CHRIST THE KING P.73.

"The God here is not of our making, drawn from our brokenness and fragility. Rather, Christ the King is strong, assured, and extremely loving. He is worthy of your trust."

Write your description of God. Who is He? What does He do? Then write the description in the book. How do they compare, and contrast?

CHAPTER 9 PRAYER CONCERNS

PRAYER CONCERNS P.79.

"Prayer is lifting up your mind and heart to God. Lifting your mind and heart to God is near impossible for you if you are tied to the earth with your brokenness and frailties."

I did not say that you have to be perfect to pray and have intimacy with God. I said not to be tied to them. What do you think I am trying to say?

PRAYER CONCERNS P.79.

"You have about sixty to eighty thousand thoughts per day. About 70 percent of them are negative. You have roughly three thousand negative thoughts per hour."

WOW! Now there is an unwelcomed thought. What negative thoughts or themes burden you every day?

PRAYER CONCERNS P.79.

"Governing your thoughts comes through governing your life. Don't expect much lifting up of anything if you are overwhelmed with a busy life. If you think you can hurry God to match your schedule, you are mistaken. Praying in a quiet place is not praying in the bathroom. It would be helpful if you had a sacred space in your home."

Yes, you have to change everything. Do the opposite of what you are doing. If you are rushing around, you are focused on earthly things and filled with anxiety. It may take some time and a lot of effort, but it is worth it. What can you do to slow down your mind, body, and spirit?

PRAYER CONCERNS P.80.

“I am saying that if you could just perceive things more clearly, you would become aware of God’s presence everywhere.”

Perhaps that is the most critical statement in the book. We are often told that we need more God within ourselves. That is not true. If you are a baptized Christian, He is fully already in you. What we need to do is to work on becoming more aware of His presence. Everything that we do is in, with, and through Him.

What are your thoughts on the above?

PRAYER CONCERNS P.80.

“You can’t force a truly divine, mystical, or godly communication. Our job is to be available. If all you do is pray in your car to and from work, as many people do, or enjoy Christian music while driving and think that satisfies an intimate relationship with your Creator, you are mistaken.”

How can you make yourself more available to God?

PRAYER CONCERNS P.80.

“There are other kinds of prayer that do not advance our relationship with a communicating God. A popular prayer could be called “let’s make a deal.” It is similar to the TV program where the contestants try to negotiate for their interests. That is fine for a TV program, but it won’t work with God.”

Describe some of your “let’s make a deal” prayers.

PRAYER CONCERNS P.81.

“If you make terms with God through some manipulation or by promising God something, or by praying in Jesus’ name so He would be bound to do what you asked, you are practicing witchcraft, misuse of Scripture, self-absorption and God the genie on the shelf all simultaneously.”

There is a new thought, misuse of praying in Jesus' name. How have you missed using that? How have you tried to manipulate God?

PRAYER CONCERNS P.83.

“God cannot be manipulated or worn out, but our sincere petitions over a period of time are important to Him and to ourselves. Praying over a period of time gives you the opportunity for clarity as to your real desires. Have you noticed when you originally asked for something, later you changed your mind? The graces that you received even praying for the wrong thing God uses so you might grow in maturity and clarity. That is also true when a large number of people join in prayer.”

People often pray quickly for something and get discouraged that God didn't make it happen. Give examples of how you have done that.

PRAYER CONCERNS P.83

"The advantage of having an active prayer life is the certainty that you are walking in, with, and through God. Prayer is mostly listening."

If you are making noise all the time, your ears won't work. Prayer is relational.

How can you improve your listening to God?

CHAPTER 10 REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS P.85.

"Have you ever attended a motivational meeting and learned ten new bold things? You then go to your office or home and try to suddenly incorporate all ten at the same time? The result is frequently chaos and resistance. The same goes for prayer and spiritual exercises. Move into your new patterns slowly and thoughtfully and involve those around you."

We are apt to fail if we make too many changes too quickly. The guilt sets in because we have failed. That guilt then cripples us. If one plan doesn't work, try another. You will find your way. What would be a good beginner's plan for you? If you think that you are not a beginner, think again.

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS P.88.

"It is possible to create a balance in your life. You will enjoy regular prayer with various lengths of time, a variety of prayers, and Scripture readings. By giving this gift of time to your Lord, it makes you available to listen to Him. When you pray, do not force an emotion, insight or reflection. I try not to expect anything. This is my gift of time to God. Silence is more important than a lot of words. Often the fruits of my prayers come at surprising times of insight, wisdom, courage, boldness and patience."

Look over the chapter and make a list of the suggestions that I have made. Pick some that you can use now. Prayer is not about emotions or getting something out of them. It is about giving your gift of time to God and letting Him do with it as He wishes. What have you wanted to get out of prayer?

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS P.89.

"You can't pretend with God. He already knows what you are trying to hide. That is both scary and comforting."

How is being honest and vulnerable with God scary for you?

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS P.89.

“St. Benedict encourages short prayers, a lot of prayers and a lot of quiet. Distractions are normal.”

How does your mind wander off? What do you do about it?

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS P.89.

"Environmental distractions are more difficult to control. However, you can choose a quieter time of day and a quieter place to pray. Having a sacred place with a candle, crucifix, holy pictures, etc. will be of great help. Your family will learn to stay away from you when you are in your sacred place."

Having a sacred place also motivates an attitude of prayer. What can you do to create your sacred space?

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS P.89.

“Being unhealthy and tired will make it difficult to raise your heart and mind to God. That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try. You can just sit there and say, ‘Here I am, Lord.’ And be quiet.”

Be patient with yourself. Not every prayer time is going to be heavenly. But you can make the best gift of time that you have to offer every time. Prayer is not about performance. It is about a relationship. How have you wrestled with performance?

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS P.90.

"Your prayer life is a pilgrimage unto itself. Often it begins with excitement as you try new prayer practices. After a while, it might seem as though it is not working and can be very frustrating. Then seemingly out of nowhere, God shows up, and you get encouraged. A real emptiness could then follow this. You might even question the value of all these prayers. Later, you will move out of yourself and become more unified with God, others, and the world."

Yes, that is an honest description. Take a moment and review some of your experiences in prayer.

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS P.91.

"You may also experience a bit of torment within yourself and uneasiness with God. What happens when you are in conflict with God's will and you don't want to be submissive. Look at that carefully and confess your sins and submit. I have had moments of interior torment and anguish. Out of nowhere, I cry in grief. My Spiritual Director suggested that I was in a spiritual purge. I was so excited that I said, "God, go for it. Purge away." There are other times that I am filled with overwhelming gratitude and cry in joy. Many times in the middle of a relaxing evening, I would get overwhelmed

for no apparent reason. I know it is God inspired. I look forward to one day understanding."

You will have a number and different experiences both during prayer and outside of prayer. Some are wonderful, and some are not. It is helpful to have a spiritual director to help you understand what is happening and not be discouraged or confused. Remember, God is far different than us. We are not going to be able to understand or comprehend many things.

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS P.91.

"You might also have had an experience of gaining ground in intimacy with God then, all of a sudden, lose it. That can happen for a number of reasons. The first is when you become closer to God; you realize that He is really far different than what you have been trying to make Him. And so it seems that you or He is farther away. You might ask God why you are resistant to the truth.

The second reason for feeling distant from God is unrepentant serious sin which puts you at odds with God. You are now fodder for Satan. Expect your life to go badly."

You might be a bit overwhelmed with all this. Prayer is relational. Our life is largely self-centered. Changing that direction is challenging but extremely rewarding. What have you experienced?

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS P.91.

"Never think that Satan can't get to you. Always be on the watch. Satan can mimic godly experiences. Satan can get you to think that you are a special holy person and rules don't apply to you."

How often have you used God to make you feel special?

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS P.92.

"Just being a churchgoer is not enough to protect you from the evil one. You need very close friends who are bold enough to tell you the truth and challenge you to change.

You would be wise to have a Spiritual Director and a Confessor.

A wise pilgrim never travels alone."

This is so very true. Going alone ensures swamps, confusion, despair, excessive ego, more sin, and failure. Do you believe what I just wrote? Why?

CHAPTER 11 TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF P.93

“Everything influences everything. If the weather is hot, I am miserable. If it is cold, I am miserable. If I am hungry, I am miserable. If I am too full, I am miserable. Everything affects everything. Your body affects your soul. Your body and soul affect your spirit. You can do things to keep your entire self healthy and strong. Cistercian Monks were the first to understand the interaction between body, soul and spirit.

If you want your spirit to become intimate with God, you have to take your soul and body on the pilgrimage with you. My efforts to describe the purpose of and interaction among your body, soul and spirit will fall short of the totality of the interactions. We are more mystery than science or theology”

We continue to discuss realistic expectations as we begin to discuss other things that can hold us back in our relationship with God. We are body, soul, and spirit living in often an unfriendly environment. We can do some things to advance and improve our situation. Look carefully at what I have suggested. List some of the things you can do now and some you can do later.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF P.93.

“I feel that it is necessary to point out that whatever is negative or harmful to humankind is from original sin still operating, the devil, or our personal or corporate sins. God does not give, cause, or use evil for His purposes. God does not give us burdens of any kind to test us in any way. Believing otherwise is our misguided way of avoiding responsibility for our own actions. Mostly we experience sowing and reaping. Of course, through grace, we can overcome the consequences of our sowing and reaping.”

I felt that it was necessary to repeat what I had written earlier. Our struggle with this material world is a product of Adamic sin, corporate or personal sin, or Satan. God gives us grace and direction on how to improve our material situation. How has He done that for you? Using the list of activities that I have presented, what can you begin to do now, later?

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF PGS.93,94.

“God’s grace is more like yeast than a lightning bolt. Our pilgrimage is more about the cross than moments of emotional self-satisfaction. The closer we become to God, the more He seems to become unapproachable. The more we actually understand our worthlessness, the more we want to approach Him. Yes, becoming a Christian is more a life journey of dying to self and becoming more intimate with the Divine.

Finally, our walk should lead to a profound understanding that everything is prayer, everything is God and that we live in, with and through Him.”

How often have you thought that you should be further along because of all of your spiritual efforts? Have you despaired because you have had little emotional satisfaction? Have you wondered what the goal of all of this is anyways?

CHAPTER 12 SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AND RECONCILIATION

Christianity is a community experience. We are not meant to go it alone. If you want a deep personal relationship with God, you need someone to help and guide you. What can you do to find such a person?

CHAPTER 13 THREE EXERCISES IN MEDITATION AND PRAYER

These chapters now allow you to think deeper and ask your questions. Enjoy.

CHAPTER 14 LISTS OF PRAYER BOOKS AND APPS

A prayer book is necessary to help you develop a sustainable prayer life. Some churches have developed their prayer books. Most prayer books rely heavily on the psalms and general scriptural readings. Please do not use contemporary booklets that are filled with someone's theological perspectives. Most are trying to influence you to accept the author's theology which is often misleading.

There are some excellent apps that you can use on your cell phone.

CHAPTER 15 TYPES OF PRAYER

My goal with this simple chapter is to illustrate that there are many other kinds of prayers beyond petitionary prayer.

CHAPTERS 16 and 17

These chapters bring you to the epiphany of personal prayer. Lectio Divina has been with us from the beginning of Christianity and is accepted by every Christian community. I encourage you to do both Lectio Divinas. Take your time. Go slowly, go deep. They will change your life.

CHAPTER 18 Rule of Life

There is a real value to having a Rule of Life. There are many wonderful groups that you can join to give you support and encouragement. Naturally, I had to speak about the Cistercian Order of the Holy Cross and Benedictine Spirituality. Enjoy.