MARY, TEACH US HOW TO LIVE!

ATTUNING OUR LIVES TO THE MYSTERIES OF THE ROSARY¹

by

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PREFACE

It is a wonderful spiritual practice to pray the rosary often. The rosary brings us into touch with the love Our Lady has for us. The rosary is comforting. The rosary draws us more deeply into the life of Jesus, Our Savior.

I came to love the rosary only after many years of immersion in other ways of prayer, such as the liturgy of the hours. It began with a sort of “bargain.” A dear friend, Suzanne Sanford, told me about her own bargain with God. She had vowed to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal that she would pray the rosary every day for the rest of her life for the intention of the conversion of her husband. Immediately after this promise, her husband asked to be instructed as a Catholic. When Suzanne told me this story, I was a Catholic married to a non-believer. I thought I would take a chance on the same promise. It took nine years more, but finally my husband did become a Catholic. In the meantime I learned how inspiring it is to be a daughter of Mary.

I soon learned that the rosary is not only a prayer but also a teacher. As we meditate on the joyful, sorrowful and glorious mysteries, we learn to view our own lives in terms of these God-given categories. Isn’t it better to rejoice in gratitude to the Lord for His gifts, than to seek escape through addictive entertainments of a dubious nature? Isn’t it better to suffer in union with Jesus, than to crawl into a shell and let depression overwhelm us? Isn’t it better to take hope from the glories of God as Mary did, than to seek solace in daydreams about futures on earth that may never come to us?

Mary, Teach Us How to Live! contains meditations, spiritual exercises and suggestions for personal reflection and group sharing based on relating the mysteries of the rosary to our own lives. Each small chapter contains the scriptural reference for the mystery, a personal sharing from my own life, and ideas for your own prayer. It is a shortened version of a longer book, Bringing the Mother With You, written with Mary Neill, O.P., which is now out of print. So many people have told me how much this book meant to them that I thought I should make the main reflections of the book available in an even more accessible form.

To conclude my introduction with a prayer:

DEAR MOTHER MARY, YOU HAVE GIVEN US THE ROSARY TO BRING US SAFELY FROM THE DIFFICULTIES OF TIME INTO THE GLORIES OF ETERNITY. MAY THE HOLY SPIRIT INSPIRE THESE MEDITATIONS SO THAT WE WILL REJOICE IN THE HOPE THAT ENABLED YOU TO ENDURE FAR GREATER CROSSSES OUT OF LOVE FOR YOUR SON.
THE MYSTERY OF THE ANNUNCIATION: LIVING WITH SURPRISE

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end."

And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no husband?"

And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible." And Mary said, "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26-38)

Meditation on the Annunciation

I AM MARY. AS A CHILD I LOVED THE FRESHNESS OF GOD'S WORLD — TO SEE THE LILIES OF THE FIELD, THE STARS. ... I PONDERED AND PONDERED—WHY ARE THE OLDER ONES SO UNHAPPY. WHY ARE THEY SO BUSY CLUTCHING WHAT THEY HAVE AND RAGING ABOUT WHAT THEY DO NOT HAVE WITH NO TIME TO LOVE THE GIFTS?

NO ONE UNDERSTOOD MY THOUGHTS EXCEPT MY COUSIN ELIZABETH. I LOVED TO VISIT HER. AND ONE MAN IN THE VILLAGE, JOSEPH. HE TOO WAS DIFFERENT.

IT WAS GOOD TO LISTEN TO THE HOLY BOOKS BEING READ. THEY EXPLAINED: THE CREATION, THE CATASTROPHES, THEN THE HOPE. I LIKE TO GO TO THE SYNAGOGUE, WHERE ALL THE HATE AND FEAR IN OUR PEOPLE TURNS TO YEARNING HOPE. THE MESSIAH WILL COME . . . SOMEDAY . . . SOONER IF WE PRAY HARDER AND TURN TO YAHWEH BY PONDERING HIS WAY AND DOING HIS WILL.
WHEN ALL THE LABORING IS DONE AND OUR HOUSE IS ASLEEP, I LIE A WAKE, LIFTING UP MY HEART TO THE HEART OF GOD, WAITING, WAITING, WAITING, FOR I KNOW NOT WHAT.


CARVED INTO AN INFINITE NUMBER OF YOUR STATUES, MARY, ARE YOUR FRAGILE HANDS OPENED IN RECEPTIVITY AND YEARNING FOR THAT WHICH NOTHING BUT INFINITE LOVE CAN FILL.

AS A MAN IS DRAWN TO A WOMAN BY THE PASSIONATE OPENNESS OF HER YEARNING FOR HIM, SO I IMAGINE GOD’S ATTRACTION TO THE WOMAN HE CREATED TO BE THE BRIDE OF HIS SPIRIT. GRACE IS GOD’S LOVE FILLING OUR OPENNESS. MARY WAS SO FULL OF GRACE THAT THERE WAS NOTHING TO PREVENT HIS COMING TO HER.

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING WROTE: "GOD’S GIFTS PUT MAN’S BEST DREAMS TO SHAME." WHAT WAS THE HIGHEST MARY COULD DREAM? TO BE THE MOTHER OF THE MESSIAH, NOT THE MOTHER OF GOD, THE BRIDE OF HIS SPIRIT.


SURPRISE IS NOT THE LAST STEP IN CONFRONTING THE ANNUNCIATION. MARY IS SURPRISED, BUT THEN SURRENDERS: “BE IT DONE TO ME ACCORDING TO THY WILL.”

MARY, YOU SURRENDERED IMMEDIATELY TO GOD’S CHALLENGE BECAUSE OF YOUR BOUNDLESS TRUST IN THE FATHER OF THE FUTURE. I SURRENDER ONLY RELUCTANTLY WITH PAINFUL DOUBT TO THE UNKNOWN, CLUTCHING TO MYSELF, REGRETFULLY, THE OLD UNFULFILLED DREAMS, AS I STEP HESITANTLY INTO THE FUTURE, THEREBY SLOWING DOWN MY ULTIMATE ARRIVAL AT THE PLACE DESTINED BY GOD FOR ME.

KIERKEGAARD CLAIMS THAT THE SELF GOD HAS PROPHESIED FOR US IS OUR REAL PERSONALITY. HOW CONSOING THAT NO MATTER HOW I KICK AND SCREAM IN PROTEST, THE PROPHECY OF GOD FOR ME, AS FOR THE WISE, SCREAM IN PROTEST, THE PROPHECY OF GOD FOR ME, AS FOR THE WISE, TRUSTING MOTHER OF GOD, WILL SOMEDAY COME TO PASS, AND ALL MY PRAYERS, MY PONDERINGS OF HIS MYSTERIES, WILL BE ANSWERED AND ACCOMPLISHED DAY BY DAY, NO MATTER WHAT. “BE IT DONE TO ME ACCORDING TO THY WILL.”

How beautiful openness, surprise, and surrender sound. And yet I fear the new and refuse its mystery over and over again. I prefer to dwell snugly in dismal repetitions of sterile patterns rather than risk the new. To the hopeful, life is the bridegroom bearing gifts. To the fearful, life is a rapist.

I can go backwards into my past to see why the word surprise brings more dread than delight:

_Surprise! your father is gone._
_Surprise! your grandmother is dead._
_Surprise! your grandfather is dead._
_Surprise! he chose another woman._
_Surprise! you are growing old._

Our Lady of Surprise, however, calls us out of our immersion in the disappointments of the past and beyond the shrewdness of the streetwise, to listen to the songs of eternity, the lullabies of Mary:

_I AM YOUR MOTHER MARY._

_BRING ME ALONG, LITTLE DAUGHTER._

_DO NOT CASTRATE THE LIVING GOD IN FRIGID FEAR._

_LET HIS ANGEL COME TO OPEN YOUR CLENCHED HANDS._

_SEE, THE GAZE OF THE ANGEL STRIPS YOU OF THE RAGS OF DISILLUSION. ONLY AN OPEN WOMB CAN RECEIVE NEW LIFE. WHEN THE_
Our Lady of Surprise teaches us to respond to change, to move beyond rigid sterile images. The Holy Spirit is the bridegroom coming with fresh visions for your future. Listen to him, let him espouse you to bring forth something new into the world. Perhaps it is a different approach to the same old tasks. Even terrible surprises are important in one's life tale. Even that which is so destructive to our smoothly established routines and plans shows us that there is a living God who initiates the dance, and that we are not spinning on a carousel alone.

Nevertheless, you will never mother the next phase of your life's tale unless you are first a free open maiden again drawing the Spirit to you by the passion of your yearning for Him; bringing rain or sunshine, His will be done.

Topics for Personal Exploration
(alone or for small group sharing)
1. List the joyful surprises in your life. Describe your favorite in detail.
2. List the painful surprises in your life.
3. How has suffering closed you to surprise?
4. What do you fear most from the future?
5. How do you make room in the future for surprise?
6. How long does it take you to surrender to new things in your life?
7. Are there any new elements in the present to which you have not surrendered?
8. How do you accept, understand, or fight the Church's stance about openness to accepting a pregnancy that comes as a surprise? Are you too afraid of losing control over your life to risk exploring the excellent, present-day natural methods of birth control?
THE MYSTERY OF THE VISITATION: GIVING AND RECEIVING SUPPORT

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent empty away. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity forever.” And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her home. (Luke 1:39-56)

Meditation on the Visitation
Mary tells me:

"WHO CAN I TELL? NOT MY FATHER AND MOTHER, NOT YET. THEY ARE TRUE SERVANTS OF GOD, BUT SHY AWAY FROM THE STRANGENESS OF HIS WAYS, PREFERING RATHER TO FOLLOW HIS HOLY WRIT THAN TO ASK AND PONDER. I WILL HAVE TO TELL THEM SOON, OF COURSE, AND THEY WILL BELIEVE ... BUT NOT YET. I DON'T WANT TO SEE THEIR BROWS FURROW OR TO FEEL THEIR FEAR FOR ME. I WANT TO EXULT IN MY JOY...AND JOSEPH, BEAUTIFUL JOSEPH...BUT NOT YET."
"ELIZABETH! YES. ELIZABETH, FAR NOW, BUT ALWAYS NEAR IN SPIRIT. SHE WILL CONFIRM ME. WHEN I WAS LITTLE I LOVED HER MOST OF ALL MY RELATIVES. SHE TAUGHT ME HOW TO CONFIRM. I ASKED HER WHY OTHER PEOPLE ALWAYS NAG AND SCOLD THOUGH IT DOES NO GOOD. YET SHE ALWAYS SAW THE GOOD IN PEOPLE AND TOLD THEM WHAT WAS PLEASING IN THEM. SHE PUT IN WORDS WHAT I SENSED, THAT INSIDE EVERYONE, EVEN THE MOST GNARLED COUNTENANCE, WAS A BEAUTIFUL DOVE. THE WORDS ADDRESSED TO OTHERS WERE A SONG AT WHOSE NOTES THE DOVE INSIDE WOULD AWAKEN AND FLUTTER ITS WINGS AND BEGIN TO FLY. WE PLAYED A LITTLE GAME TOGETHER. SHE WOULD ANOINT SOMEONE WITH WORDS OF CONFIRMATION AND I WOULD SMILE AS SOON AS I COULD SEE THE DOVE IN THE SHINE OF GRATITUDE IN THEIR EYES OR THE SWEETNESS OF A LITTLE GESTURE.

"NOW IT IS I WHO NEED THE CONFIRMATION. THE HOLY DOVE HAS DESCENDED UPON ME BUT IS STILL HIDDEN WITHIN. SHE WILL CONFIRM ME AND THE LIGHTNESS IN MY HEART WILL FLY OUT INTO THE WORLD. SHE, THE BEARER OF ANOTHER MYSTERY, WILL KNOW. REJOICING TOGETHER, WE WILL BANISH THE DEMON OF DREAD THAT COMES TO ME SOMETIMES AT NIGHT WHEN I THINK OF THE SHAME THAT MY WONDERFUL SECRET MUST CAUSE THOSE WHO LOVE ME."

The mystery of the Visitation can be seen as an icon of friendship. The philosopher Von Hildebrand taught me that all friendships are based on the values two persons appreciate in common. For instance, I feel friendly toward other women who knit. We can talk about the good feeling of the wool passing through our fingers and the joy of giving handmade afghans, sweaters, and booties to those we love.

The more of me I can share, the more themes for the confirming friendship. Deeper friendships arise when we can commune in the loves that we carry deep within us. There is a special thrill when people who love the same leader meet. For hours they can talk about the way that beloved, admired person transformed their lives. How much further can friendships go when they are based on sharing God, the apex of all beauty, goodness, truth, and love!

But the confirming element of friendship includes even more than loving the same things. There is also a delight in the uniqueness of the other, and this pleasure makes the loved friend more beautiful, bringing out his hidden loveliness.

The true friend sees more in us than we see. We belittle ourselves so terribly. Mary knew she was bride of the Spirit, mother of the Son of the most High, but it is Elizabeth who calls her by that magnificent title, Mother of God, and then Mary's joy cannot be contained. It flows out in ecstatic themes that only the most glorious music of the great composers can contain. Have you heard the trumpet blasts triumphantly proclaiming Mary's Magnificat as Bach composed it? The first time I heard it was in a record store when I was still an atheist. Though I dwelt in the valley of darkness my heart leapt, and I bought it and...
played it at home over and over again, racing about the room in surging hope that my mind could not justify and my heart could not contain.

The Visitation: Giving and Receiving Support

1. Think of peak moments when you affirmed a friend or were yourself confirmed by one.
2. Describe the moment when you were in deepest need of affirmation from someone.
3. Who in your family is most confirming?
4. Are you free enough to tell your secrets to your friends?
5. In what ways are you driven to “accomplishment” at the expense of not being present to others?
6. What helps you share from the heart, rather than merely factually or intellectually?
7. Recall instances when a stranger confirmed you.
8. Write a confirming statement about each significant person in your life and share this with him or her when appropriate.
In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in that region there were shepherds out in the field keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!"

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:1-20)

**Meditation on the Nativity**

"I am Mary, heavy with the child who is to be the Savior. I had to come with Joseph. Do you understand? Full of grace though I am, still I am a woman, vulnerable, needing his strength for my protection, and for the fathering of the child. And he needs me now. He needs to grow in the mystery we are carrying together as we move along our journey. Ever since his dream he becomes happier and happier in his undreamed-of-role. He himself
IS ASTONISHED TO SEE HOW THE SPIRIT CAN TURN UNCERTAINTY AND SACRIFICE INTO HOLY FAITH AND GENEROSITY.


"I AM ARRIVING IN BETHLEHEM HALF DEAD. JOSEPH IS SEARCHING FOR A PLACE. THE BABY IS DESCENDING. I GRASP JOSEPH’S HAND AND MUTTER PRAYERS OF SURRENDER.

"SING, JOSEPH, SING ALLELUIA TO THE LORD! I WHISPER, FOR I CANNOT SPEAK. HE IS WRAPPING HIM IN THE BEAUTIFUL GARMENTS MOTHER ANNA EMBROIDERED FOR MY SON. LIGHT FLOODS MY HEART. MINE. GOD’S. THE SON OF DAVID. THE SAVIOR OF OUR PEOPLE, ISRAEL.

"WHO IS COMING? SHEPHERDS. THEY SAY THE ANGELS SENT THEM. OF COURSE. IT DOES NOT AMAZE ME THAT THE ANGEL GABRIEL WHO CAME TO ZECHARIAH, ME, AND JOSEPH SHOULD COME TO ANNOUNCE THE COMING TO THE POOR. WHAT ASTOUNDS ME IS THAT THEY, THE SHEPHERDS, WHO I KNOW TO BE THE MOST DOUBTING OF MEN, SHOULD HAVE BELIEVED. NOW THEY ARE KNEELING TO HIM! OF COURSE, THE LIGHT IS NOT JUST IN MY HEART, BUT FLOODING THE WHOLE MANGER.

"I AM FALLING ASLEEP NOW. THE BABY IS SUCKING AT MY BREAST. JOSEPH SLEEPS BY MY SIDE. THE INMOST IS NOW WITHOUT. I SEE HIM AND HE SEES ME. ALL IS GRACE."

G.K. Chesterton in *The Everlasting Man* claims that no tale in any religion can ever rival in beauty and awe the image of God as an infant in a manger. Yet that same paradoxical mystery also offends the intellect. How can the eternal God really enter time to be swaddled in diapers? Kierkegaard demanded to know. How can the
omnipotent one be mere infant, the Spirit of the cosmos, a morsel of flesh? What holy revelation is to be witnessed at a birthing and in the presence of the newborn infant?

Last year, I witnessed the nativity in the form of a woman in labor whose childbirth I was allowed to watch. My friend, Elasah Drogin, was to have a delivery at the home of her midwife and close friend, Ann Govan, a fulltime nurse in a maternity ward.

To be honest, I was not eager to come and witness the event. My own childbearing was far from idyllic. In spite of all the instructions of natural childbirth experts, I shrieked through my short labors. Might not my friend Elasah, a tense type like me, also react as I had done? Thus, I hoped that the call inviting me to the home delivery would find me out of the house.

But as Providence would have it, I was home when the call came. Elasah, in her travail, taught me what it means to suffer as a Christian, in a state of grace, penitentially.

With each contraction, Elasah's face remained undistorted but her eyes became deeper and deeper, more accepting of the penance of childbearing. None of my furious rebellion! She knew that pain is the price of life and she would pay it to the full.

Surrounding her, we sang and prayed aloud. Could Joseph of the chanting Jewish people have done less? Why do we imagine that he felt out of place and fussed with the animals instead of being intimately involved in this exquisite moment?

Then came the last push. Under the patient guidance of the midwife's hands, the little baby's head came sliding out. Miraculously, there he was: Peter Nicholas Drogin!

The Nativity: Creating the New

1. Have you ever witnessed a childbirth? Describe your experience. Write a re-creation of your own birth as you imagine it.
2. Describe your own childbirth(s) if you are a mother.
3. If you have never borne a child, describe your feelings about this fact. What have you "mothered or fathered" forth?
4. What is the most creative thing you've ever done?
5. List several creative projects you would like to be part of before you die. How do you deal with those who belittle your creativity as a mere hobby?
6. Have you known anyone who has lost a baby? How would you comfort such a woman? If you have ever lost a child, write this infant a letter.
7. Have you known anyone who shared with you that she had an abortion? Were you able to support her personhood and that of her lost baby? How do you see the Church trying to protect the personhood of both infant and mother in rejecting abortion?
8. Have you breast-fed your child? Describe your experience. If not, how do you respond to the image of a woman breast-feeding?
THE MYSTERY OF THE PRESENTATION: HANDING ON THE TRADITION

And when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And inspired by the Spirit he came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel."

And his father and mother marveled at what was said about him; and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed."

And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher; she was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years from her virginity and as a widow till she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she gave thanks God, and spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

And when they had performed everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. (Luke 2:22-49)

Meditation on the Presentation
Mary might be telling me:

"I AM MARY, A JEWISH WOMAN. I REMEMBER THE EXCITEMENT OF ALL NEW MOTHERS TAKING THEIR FIRSTBORN SON TO THE TEMPLE, BLENDING PRIDE WITH THE MYSTICAL KNOWLEDGE THAT THIS CHILD BELONGS TO GOD. THE CHILD IS BEING TAKEN FROM THE NARROW CONFINES OF THE MOTHER'S EMBRACE AND OFFERED TO YAHWEH IN
HEAVEN, THEN CARRIED HOME, BLESSED BY ANCIENT RITUAL. HE BELONGS TO GOD, COMMUNITY, AND FAMILY AT ONCE.

AND NOW IT IS MY TURN, MY HEART SWELLING WITH EXULTATION, FOR MY SON IS NOT ONLY THE SON OF MY FLESH, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY, BUT THE SON OF GOD, BEGOTTEN OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, THE LONG-AWAITED ONE, THE PROMISE, AND I AM HIS MOTHER. IT IS OUR SECRET, JOSEPH’S AND MINE, AS WE TAKE HIM TRIUMPHANTLY TO THE TEMPLE. WHEN THE WOMEN COME TO COO OVER US, TO SAY HOW MUCH HE LOOKS LIKE JOSEPH OR ME, WE SING IN OUR HEARTS HOW MUCH HE WILL LOOK LIKE THE HOLY SPIRIT. WE HAVE SEEN THE SHEKINAH GLORY SHINING IN HIM. WE WHO LONGED NIGHT AND DAY FOR THE LIGHT NOW LIVE WITH THE LIGHT MOMENT BY MOMENT BEFORE OUR EYES, IN OUR ARMS. JUST A LITTLE MOMENT OF PAIN, MY JESUS, WHEN YOU ARE CIRCUMCISED. IT IS NOTHING. DO YOU KNOW THAT MY JESUS? PAIN IS BUT A MOMENT IN THE ETERNITY OF JOY WHICH IS YOUR FATHER’S HEART. YES, YOU KNOW. I LOOK INTO YOUR LUMINOUS EYES AND KNOW THAT YOU KNOW.

“LOOK, THEY ARE COMING! THE OLD SAINTS, SIMEON AND ANNA. THEY ARE COMING TO SALUTE YOU, MY DARLING. OF COURSE THEY KNOW YOU. REJOICE JERUSALEM, YOUR SAVIOR IS HERE!”

Our era seems to witness some groups moving away from external manifestations and celebration and others moving towards them. Many Christians have become alienated from Church rites and want to live their faith as a private, even hidden, orientation. Others seek the comfort of ritual, moving from loose cultural settings to highly structured ones.

I come from an untraditional background which mocked religious rituals as superstitious and hypocritical, and made family celebrations as informal as possible. In becoming a Catholic, it was not the rituals that attracted me at all, but rather, the substance of the belief that Christ was really personally in the sacraments. Only gradually did I come to understand the motherly function of regular celebrations to root the spirit securely in the good earth of the kingdom.

I also came to regard refusal of the public exhibition of one's faith in community as a form of pride. One imagines that one's own faith is pristine, not to be sullied by the deficiencies of others. In reality, it is the support of the community of believers through their prayers and sacrifices that has nurtured the individual throughout the centuries. The same is true in family life. At times of proud aloofness, one imagines that one does not need the others. In reality, qualities in others, missing in oneself, are what give one strength. The defects of group unity are so visible, yet the bonds of this unity are so much stronger and profound.
The Presentation: Handing on the Tradition

1. What family rituals were part of your life as a child?
2. Which customs have you discarded and which have you carried on?
3. What rituals have you started yourself?
4. Do you help arrange family celebrations, or is it all left to one other person?
5. Describe your most profound experiences of ritual, whether familial - a Thanksgiving dinner, for example - or ecclesial: baptism, confirmation, penance, marriage, ordination, anointing, Eucharist.
6. Do you have personal rituals to enhance your sense of the sacred?
Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom; and when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, but supposing him to be in the company they went a day’s journey, and they sought him among their kinsfolk and acquaintances; and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when they saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, “Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously.” And he said to them, “How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” And they did not understand the saying which he spoke to them. And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man. (Luke 2:41-52)

Meditation on the Finding in the Temple
I hear Mary telling me:

“I AM MARY, SINGING PILGRIM SONGS ON THE ROAD TO JERUSALEM. IT IS DIFFICULT TO JOURNEY FROM OUR VILLAGE - THE ENDLESS PREPARATIONS FOR THE LONG TREK - BUT ONCE WE ARE OFF, IT IS OUR JOY TO GO WITH THE CROWDS TOWARD THE HOLY CITY. HOW MUCH MORE SO AS EACH YEAR MY SON GROWS IN AGE AND GRACE. MY KINSMEN, DO THEY RECOGNIZE WHO HE IS? I THINK NOT. A BIT, YES. THERE IS A CERTAIN REVERENCE BY THEM FOR HIS PURE GOODNESS. THEY NEVER SEE HIM DO ONE OF THE MANY CRUEL THINGS MOST BOYS DO. THE OTHER CHILDREN COME TO HIM TO JUDGE THEIR DISPUTES AND TO INVENT GAMES BETTER THAN THEY EVER COULD DREAM OF. AND HE LOVES TO LAUGH. ON THE ROUNDS OF MY WORK I HEAR HIM LAUGHING WITH JOSEPH OR THE VILLAGE MEN. MOST OF ALL, MY HEART BURSTS WITH PRIDE TO HEAR THE WISDOM OF HIS THOUGHTS. THE BEST ONES HE KEEPS FOR ME, FOR HE KNOWS I WILL TREASURE THEM IN MY HEART.”
"NOW WE ARE TRUDGING BACK FROM JERUSALEM, SAD AT DEPARTING, BUT HAPPY TO SEE OUR CITY TEEMING WITH PEOPLE COMING FROM SO FAR TO PRAISE THE HOLY ONE.

WHERE IS MY JESUS? I TOLD HIM WE WOULD BE LEAVING. HE ALWAYS DOES WHAT HE KNOWS IS NECESSARY. HE WILL BE MEANDERING AMONG THE KINSMEN TELLING AND HEARING STORIES OF JERUSALEM. 'JOSEPH, WHERE IS JESUS?' I HAVE NOT SEEN HIM YET! FEAR, ANGER, MORE FEAR, TERROR, MY FEET GROWING SWIFTER AND SWIFTER AS I SEEK HIM FUTILELY ON THE ROAD. DID HE WANDER OFF INTO THE HILLS TO PRAY, AS HE DOES SO OFTEN IN NAZARETH, IN HIS NEED TO ESCAPE THE SWARMING VILLAGE, TO BE ALONE WITH HIS FATHER? FINALLY HIS FACE. WE HAVE NOT LOST HIM. THERE HE IS. HOW PRINCELY HE SITS AMONG THE ELDERS. HOW THEY HANG ON HIS WORDS. JESUS! WHY DID YOU NOT TELL US? HOW COULD WE KNOW?

"I AM ASHAMED AND CONFUSED. HE WANTED ME TO HAVE KNOWN NOT BY HIS WORDS BUT BY PRAYER THAT HE HAD TO REMAIN BEHIND. WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? NO. HIS HOUR HAS NOT YET COME. I KNOW THAT. I AM HIS MOTHER. OH, HE DOES KNOW IT, TOO. HE IS COMING WITH US AFTER ALL.

"AS WE TRUDGE ALONG TOWARD NAZARETH, MY JESUS IS QUIETER THAN USUAL. I WONDER IF HE WILL FEEL CONFINED IN OUR VILLAGE?


"I TAKE HIS HAND AND SMILE. HE SMILES, TOO, AND ALL IS WELL."

This mystery challenges us to accept the pains of comings and goings. Sometimes we refuse to leave the nest of home’s security, a secure job, tradition, etc. . . . We want to be the child in the womb rather than the mother or father of ourselves. We refuse to grow. Is the image of growth so popular in our times because it is so contrary to our innermost fears?

Sometimes we refuse the homecoming. Always wanderers, job-hoppers, dilettantes, rebels, we avoid commitment and roots.
But the Church calls us into the home of her beautiful sanctuaries, her history, her community of saints and sinners, past and present and future, to be nourished and then sent out to do the will of the Father.

Another facet of the mystery of journeying and homecoming is the balance between the unusual and the ordinary. Quiet people often prefer the ordinary to the volcanic eruptions of the unexpected, the stimulating. These people are the homebodies who have to be forced out by extraordinary and inescapable crises. Then there are the fiery spirits for whom the ordinary seems mediocre and unbearably tedious. Being forced into stable, repetitive patterns is deadly to them.

Seeing splendor in the ordinary and peace in the midst of storm is the gift of wholeness to be found in truly holy people. Mary and Jesus represent to our spirits both a consciousness able to delight in the mundane and routine, and the visionary yearning, the courage and trust of the pilgrim and crusader on the most perilous spiritual journeys ever made. Mary, who assumed the terrible but glorious burden of being Mother to God and his first and greatest disciple. Jesus, who battled Satan, undercut proud error with homespun parables, and forgiving betrayal, contempt, and murder with the loving peace of the Father.

The mystery of the Finding in the Temple has often been probed for symbols of the journey that parents must make in gradually releasing their growing children to adult independence. We parents must slowly loosen our hold on our children, substituting lighter cords of mutual respect for chains of possessive authority. In struggling with the intense desire to protect my teenagers against the world and their own darker urges, I turned to the older women of my parish who have already made this stage of the journey. They all say the same to me: love and let go, love and let go. Because you cannot control them does not mean God cannot protect and save them.

The Finding in the Temple: Losing and Keeping
1. Were you ever lost as a child? Recall the joy of seeing your parents.
2. Describe that moment or that period in your life when you felt most lost.
3. List the people whom you have lost from your life by death or time's decay. What was the gift each person gave you? Write a letter or a dialogue with the person whom you miss the most. Keep writing and praying until you have a sense of this person's presence.
4. Jesus talked with the scholars. What dialogue do you keep with writers and teachers? What teacher did you have who was most helpful to you?
5. In your parental roles, describe the struggle with the process of letting your children go and receiving them back on a new level.
6. Do you like your work? Write a fantasy of exactly what Joseph would say to you were he teaching you about your work.
7. Do you have difficulty accepting petty daily tasks? Can you find splendor in the ordinary?
THE MYSTERY OF THE AGONY IN THE GARDEN: CRYING OUT

And he came out, and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. And when he came to the place he said to them, “Pray that you may not enter into temptation.” And he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, and knelt down and prayed, “Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.” And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground. And when he rose from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow, and he said to them, “Why do you sleep? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation.” (Luke 22:39-46)

Meditation on the Agony in the Garden

I KNOW, JESUS, THAT IN YOUR GETHSEMANE NIGHT, ALL OF OUR SINS FLOODED YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS. YOU KEW WITH DEVASTATING CLARITY WHAT WE WERE AND WHAT WE COULD DO TO YOU FOR AGES TO COME, AND YOU WEPT, EVEN IN BLOOD. YOUR REALIZATIONS, AT THAT VERY MOMENT, WERE BEING CONFIRMED BY YOUR BETRAYAL BY YOUR FRIEND JUDAS, AND YOUR SLEEPING FRIENDS’ NEGLECT. YET YOU CAME FORTH NOT HATING, BUT FORGIVING. WHAT DEARLY CONSOLING WORDS THESE ARE: “FORGIVE THEM FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO.”


In the hour of agony, we try to close up the doors of our heart, grit our teeth, clench our fists, and tighten our lips, that undaunted by internal bleeding, our life may go on as usual. After all, why drown in the quicksand of emotion? Tears cannot help. Better to harden our hearts and let work and time and tranquilizers cure all, than to “trouble deaf heaven with our bootless cries.”
Yet, I shudder at the nauseating night revelations! It is the time of Satan’s possession, but long does he go unrecognized by me. Instead, all the evil thoughts I have flooding my mind about the people I encountered during the day - about deadly motives behind their every word and act - appear to me to be established truth. Yes, and not only that, but who am I to condemn, for am I not deserving of their calumny and persecution, miserable wretch that I am? And no one exists to save them or me. Nothing is salvageable for any of us. So why not kill myself!

I hastily rise in the night, go to the bathroom, then splash my face and hands as if for purification - may all this inner filth disappear! Back to bed. My husband groggily asks, “Are you okay, honey?” I quickly mutter, “Yes, I’m fine. Go back to sleep.” Let my husband stay asleep lest his Gethsemane song join mine to tear my heart to pieces even more.

At times like this, only reaching for the Mother, the rosary of Mary under my pillow, can bring a measure of peace.

Crying out implies trust that someone is listening, even from afar. In our worst agonies it seems that no one near or far can hear, and, yet, we still cry out.

THERE IS NO GOD, THE FOOLISH SAITH. BUT NONE, “THERE IS NO SORROW.

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

In the throes of pain we beg like Jesus that the cup be taken away. And if the chalice is not taken away, we have three options: flight, fight, or surrender.

Peter chose to fight, then flee. John chose to flee, but finally surrendered beneath the Cross. Jesus chose to surrender: “Thy will be done, be done, be done...

Oh, Lady of Sorrow, collect our tears in the chalice of atonement. Help us to cry with pain lest we cry instead only with rage. Bring us to our Savior that our blood may mingle with His, that we may whisper in the night: “Father, my Father, if You will let this chalice pass . . . but not my will, Thine be done.” Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our agony.

The Agony in the Garden: Crying Out

1. Recall the most agonizing moments of your life. Were you too stoical in confronting your agony?
2. Were you able to ask for help from others at that time? From God?
3. Have you ever been the one to comfort another in their agony?
4. Write a dialogue with Jesus about healing the memory of an agony where you were left alone.
5. What is the difficult cup of sorrow you are struggling to accept now?
THE SCOURGING: ENDURING VIOLENCE

So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas; and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified. (Mark 15:15)

Meditation on the Scourging

Voices I hear about this mystery:

"RAGE! RED-HOT, CHOKING RAGE! LAVA FROM THE VOLCANO OF HATE! RELEASE YOURSELF!"

"I AM CAIAPHAS, THE HIGH PRIEST. STRIKE, BEAT, BATTER; BY WORDS SCOURGE THE BLASPHEMOUS NAZARENE. BUT WHEN THEY FAIL TO ANNIHILATE HIM, I REND MY GARMENTS, BARING MY BREAST AGAINST HIS UNYIELDING GLANCE."

"I AM PILATE, THE ROMAN PROCURATOR. I SCOURGE WITH THE SUPERIORITY OF MY SKEPTICISM. LIKE A FATHER OF SQUABBLING CHILDREN, I BEGIN TO HATE THE VICTIM AS MUCH AS THE VICTIMIZER FOR DISTURRING MY PEACE. LET THEM TEAR EACH OTHER TO SHREDS! WHO AM I TO GRAPPLE WITH THEIR INEXHAUSTIBLE BLASPHEMERS?!"

"I AM A ROMAN SOLDIER, DISGUSTED WITH THE TEDIUM OF FOREIGN SERVICE IN THIS MISERABLE PROVINCE. AND HERE IS THIS MISERABLE WRETCH BEFORE ME, ANOTHER ONE OF THOSE STUBBORN JEWISH FANATICS WHO PROLONGS THE LENGTH AND DISCOMFORT OF MY EXILE HERE. TO THE DEVIL WITH YOU AND YOUR PEOPLE, AND WITH UNSETTLING SILENCE AND SUBMISSION - DAMNED JEWISH PRIDE AND RESISTANCE IN ANOTHER MASK, HUH? I'LL HAVE MY MEN RIP IT ALL TO SHREDS, NAZARENE!"

"I AM JESUS OF NAZARETH. WITH THEIR MISUNDERSTANDING AND REJECTION, MY PEOPLE FLAY MY SPIRIT AND FLESH SO DREADFULLY. FATHER, FATHER! GIVE ME STRENGTH TO LOVE THEM UNTIL THE END. THROUGH SHEETS OF SWEAT AND BLOOD I SEE THE PITIFULLY SHRUNKEN SOULS OF MY PERSECUTORS - AND THOSE OF ALL THE VIOLENT PEOPLE TO COME, FROM AGE TO AGE, WORLD WITHOUT END FATHER, FORGIVE THEM, FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO."

Violence is everywhere condemned, yet flourishes everywhere. I, the writer of this booklet, flagellate those who are weaker while I do not dare to strike the stronger. I make scapegoats of the victims who have no protection and escape from my abuse: family members, fellow workers, absent bosses. Moreover, I lacerate the shortcomings in myself that I find absolutely
intolerable. "Of all beasts the man-beast is the worst: to others and himself, the crudest foe," wrote Richard Baxter in the seventeenth century.

At times, my violence is outright and crude: I yell and scream and hit. But more often it is invisible and subtle, yet no less deadly effective. "And hated with the gall of gentle souls," wrote the lady of the sweet sonnets, Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

But there are also positive images of violence. Flannery O'Conner entitled a book with a seldom-quoted phrase from the gospels, "The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence and the violent bear it away." "I have come to bring not peace but a sword," proclaimed our gentle Savior. Patrick White, the Australian Nobel-Prize winning novelist, envisions God as the great vivisectionist, tearing open His creatures, pain being the miracle truth serum that He offers to save man from his disgusting complacency.

Violent is the righteous anger of the Lord scourging the moneychangers in the Temple. Violent is His sarcastic refutation of the sophistries of the leaders who ridiculed and rejected His message. Violent is the Lord when He refuses our urgent appeals for unending happiness, slamming the door on our most fervent desires. Violent is His insistent demand that we crucify our hatred rather than our enemy. Violent is the Lord who tears us away from our cozy life-style and quiet prayers to look upon and respond with the eyes and heart of Jesus to our fellow man as the person of Jesus incarnated for us. And violent must be our efforts to fulfill this demand by transforming ourselves and our world into His person and kingdom. Many are the ways from which a person can flee from scourging. One may cringe so low that the whip misses one. One may flatter so well that the whip never falls. One may carry such a swift and brutal whip oneself that no one dare attack. How terrifying and disturbing are the phrases of Jesus insisting that those who follow Him will and must suffer while those well-loved by men who are spared scourging in this life will suffer in eternity.

The Scourging: Enduring Violence
1. What is the greatest violence you have done toward anyone?
2. What is the greatest violence done to you?
3. Describe how you are violent toward yourself and others in your present circumstances.
4. Have you ever thought of God as being violent toward you? Describe your feelings about that.
5. In what ways do you need to become more violent about besieging the kingdom of God (i.e., "The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence and the violent bear it away.")?
6. When do you think people should be passive? Assertive? Aggressive? Do you believe that assertiveness or aggressiveness can be combined with unconditional love?
THE MYSTERY OF THE CROWNING WITH THORNS: ACCEPTING HUMILIATION

And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the praetorium); and they called together the whole battalion. And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and plaiting a crown of thorns they put it on him. And they began to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they struck his head with a reed, and spat upon him, and they knelt down in homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak, and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him. (Mark 15:16-20)

Meditation on the Crowning with Thorns
Jesus, I imagine these as your thoughts:

"IN A DELIRIUM OF PAIN THERE COME A FEW MOMENTS OF OBLIVION TO SAVOR SENSATIONS FROM THE PAST: MY MOTHER’S SOFT EMBRACE, THE SCENT OF MARY MAGDALENE’S PERFUME STILL IN MY HAIR, THE WARM HEAD OF JOHN LEANING ON MY BREAST - THE FACES OF THOSE WHO HAVE LOVED ME LIKE ROSES OPENING BEFORE MY DELIGHTED GAZE.

"I OPEN MY EYES TO SEE SOLDIERS APPROACHING ME AGAIN. THEIR GRIMACING FACES DANCE WILDLY AS MY VISION CAREENS, UNTIL ONE OF THEM BRINGS FORTH A HIDEOUS CROWN, NOT OF ROSES, BUT OF THORNS, AND SMASHES IT DOWN ON MY HEAD. RAUCOUSLY THEY JEER, "HAIL, KING OF THE JEWS!" FATHER! THY WILL BE DONE! I AM A LAMB LED TO THE SLAUGHTER.

"AN INSIDIOUS AND FAMILIAR VOICE WHISPERS IN MY EAR, 'DESTROY THEM! YOU FOOL, SUMMON THE ANGELIC HOSTS. IN ONE INSTANT THEY WILL BE GONE. YOU WILL BE FREE TO GO WHERE PEOPLE WILL GIVE YOU WHAT YOU DESERVE, SON OF GOD!' DEPART FROM ME! GET THEE BEHIND ME, SATAN!

"FATHER, THIS IS LOVE, TO LAY DOWN MY LIFE FOR MY FRIENDS. AGAIN THAT VOICE: 'FRIENDS? WHAT FRIENDS? THESE?!

"YES, FATHER, FORGIVE THEM. FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO!"

In his book Fear and Trembling, Soren Kierkegaard shows how one passes from being a Knight of Resignation to becoming a Knight of Faith. Most Christians never make even the first difficult yet crucial step. Using Abraham as his model, Kierkegaard showed how necessary it was for that patriarch to renounce all possibility of saving his only son
before his hope could become authentic. With infinite resignation, the believer must put all things into the hands of God and be ready to sacrifice every earthly good should that be the will of God who is far above all rational understanding. Then, having given all into God's hands, Abraham became a Knight of Faith by daring to hope that this same God would answer the prayer of his heart.

Jesus in his passion is the model for such seemingly irrational, perfect trust in the Father. How logical it would be for Jesus to say, "That's enough. I will suffer the agony, and I will even allow myself to be scourged. But to be ridiculed in your name, dear Father, is too much!" But Jesus, perfect Son of the Father, let Himself become total victim with unconditional resignation.

How differently we Christians approach the crown of suffering. We say: "I didn't deserve this. That was bad enough, but this is too much to be endured! No one can expect anyone to forgive this!" Human reasoning asserts: "Is it not natural and God-given for man to wish for just rewards? Does not Jesus Himself promise that the good will be rewarded?"

For instance, it is hard for mothers to resign themselves to the ingratitude of offspring. The mother gives and gives. But the children first take for granted, then reject her, and finally fling her gifts back to her, often with words of mockery and bitterness: "I didn't ask to be born. Who are you to tell me anything, you who ...It's a free country! I hope I never become like you!"

It seems that only when mothers - parents in general - renounce all hope of grateful love does such love begin to manifest itself in offspring. First parents must understand that children "know not what they do," and forgive them from the heart. The father of the Prodigal Son first lets the ingrate son leave with his inheritance, knowing the son will squander it all. Then, having resigned himself to never seeing that beloved one again, hope begins to grow. Each day before sunset the father walks to the hill where he can see from afar whether his son might be returning. Because the father's heart is not in stoic negation, he is ready with wine and fatted calf for his son's converted heart.

Some move from sadness to resignation to hope. But most often people go from the feeling of being mistreated to bitterness, then to retaliation. "Revenge is sweet," as the saying goes. I must admit to having cherished grievances for decades about injustices of a few minutes duration.

I watch myself when I become bitchy, when I fight dirty, and when my heart is full of hostility, and I ask when this ill-feeling all started? Usually there is no satisfactory answer. Could just one quickly spoken word trigger such hatred in me? No, the cause of such anger lies in deeper wounds whose painful surfaces those few words have grazed. The crowning with thorns may have taken place long ago, but the immediate situations served to push one of the thorns in some inches deeper.

Spiritual exercises in the healing of memory are helping many people to find the point in the past where the hurts took place. Back in the place of greatest pain, the Christian is to imagine the face of Jesus crowned with thorns. From this vision, we learn to take comfort, accept our own pain, be cleansed of bitterness, forgive, and hope for reconciliation.
Very often a certain amount of psychological counseling is helpful or necessary. We need to make the journey into our moments of shameful self-hatred or bitterness toward others in the company of an experienced traveler.

The Crowning with Thorns: Accepting Humiliation

1. Recall those times in your life when, you felt most humiliated and mocked.
2. Describe any moments of reconciliation with people you thought had humiliated you.
3. List people who have humiliated you. Focus on one person whom you most need to forgive, describing the circumstances that surrounded his/her life at this time which help explain the action toward you. Write an imaginary letter to the person or dialogue with him/her until you have a sense of some resolution.
4. When has your agony led you to a resignation that refuses to hope?
5. What are some unloving aspects of your relationships with your intimates (spouse or friends) that you have refused to accept, or resigned yourself to in a way that precludes hope?
THE MYSTERY OF THE CARRYING OF THE CROSS: FLOWING WITH PAIN

And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus. And there followed him a great multitude of the people, and of women who bewailed and lamented him. But Jesus turning to them said, ’Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ’Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never gave suck!’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ’Tall on us’; and to the hills, ’Cover us.’ For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?’ (Luke 23:26-31)

Meditation on the Carrying of the Cross

When I contemplate your carrying of the cross, Jesus, I hear humanity’s pain-river chant:

“NO, FATHER, THAT ONE IS JUST TOO MUCH FOR ME. I AM NOT STRONG ENOUGH, FOR THE LOAD IS TOO HEAVY. YOU SEE, I AM NOT LIKE THOSE OTHER ONES WHO CARRY THIS KIND OF BURDEN. THEY ARE STRONGER. YOU, JESUS - AND MARY - BECOME STRONGER FROM CARRYING THE LOAD. BUT I, WELL … I AM TOO YOUNG, OR NOW, TOO OLD, TOO IGNORANT, SCARED.” . . . AND INSTEAD OF LOOKING STRONG AND NOBLE, THE ONLY TIMES I HAVE TRIED TO TAKE ON A LOAD, I CAME OUT OF THE EFFORT IN PIECES, LOOKING SO UGLY, NERVOUS, STUPID AND BAD!

“ALL RIGHT, I’LL GIVE IT A TRY. OH, MY GOD! SEE! I’VE FALLEN ALREADY UNDER ITS MASSIVE WEIGHT. I TOLD YOU I COULD NOT DO IT.

“WHAT? SOMEONE’S TRYING TO WIPE OFF MY SWEATY FACE! WHO IS IT? A STRANGER; SOMEONE WHO CANNOT STAY WITH ME OR KNOW AND UNDERSTAND ME. SO NOW IT’S EVEN WORSE THAN BEFORE. A LITTLE COMFORT, AND THE BURDEN SEEMS WORSE AFTERWARDS!

“NO SOMEONE’S COMING TO HELP CARRY MY LOAD! WELL, I’M NOT SURE I WANT HIS HELP! UGH! FALLEN AGAIN! WELL, I SURELY NEED THE HELP, DON’T I?! I WISH I COULD LIE HERE FOREVER! BUT I CAN’T ANY LONGER. THIS BURDEN IS NOW MINE FOREVER.
I WANT TO RUN AWAY, STRAIGHT INTO THE CROWDS, AND JUST DISAPPEAR. IS THE END OF THE ROAD IN SIGHT? EACH MOMENT SEEMS TO ME LIKE A HUNDRED YEARS.

“WHAT? THE BURDEN SUDDENLY SEEMS LIGHTER! IT’S BEEN TAKEN FROM ME. MY BACK IS NEARLY BROKEN! NO WONDER; I’VE REACHED THE END OF THE ROAD. IT’S A PLACE OF EXECUTION TO WHICH THE ROAD HAS BROUGHT ME! AND I CAN FINALLY LAY DOWN MY WEARY BODY AND LIE STILL - AS THEY NAIL ME TO THE BURDEN THAT I’VE MANAGED TO CARRY SO LONG, SO FAR. I AND IT ARE HENCEFORTH FOREVER ONE.”

Many seek to disembark when the boat of life begins to be pulled into pain-river. How can we do this? We can jump overboard and abandon the ties that threaten to pull us into the vortex. Or we can sail on, lulled to sleep by drink or drugs. Or we can work so hard at rowing against the tide that we become too tired to fear and weep. At a certain level, all crosses borne for long periods of time are alike, whether they are the pain of sickness, loneliness, overwork, or whatever.

At first, the cross brings a sense that it is too heavy. Then, that this cross cannot be God’s will because we are carrying it so clumsily. Instead of looking sanctified by the effort, we appear more demoralized and ludicrous each day we carry it. How desirable does it seem to be able to suffer gloriously, Hollywood-style! I prefer the vividly horrible paintings of the Passion, for only they can match my deepest feelings of humiliation and despair as I fall and fall and fall under the burden of the cross.

The impulse to flee from the cross is an ever-present temptation. But to flee from it, is to paradoxically become nailed to it, for the cross that is sent to us is our own, demanding that our body and spirit be shaped by and grow in the effort to carry it to its destination.

Once crushed by the weight of a cross and believing I would die of it, I heard a hymn about Jesus, and suddenly I wept upon learning that pain was not just a part of life, but WAS life, WAS Jesus. Then I stretched out my arms and received my cross and my tears became a river that joined his, and I was ready to go on.

Francis Bacon wrote: "Prosperity is the blessing of the Old Testament. Adversity is the blessing of the New, which carrieth the greater benediction."

The Carrying of the Cross: Flowing with Pain

1. When has pain seemed unendurable to you?
2. Was there a Simeon to help you with this cross or a Veronica to wipe your face?
3. Are there those who have let you down whom you need to forgive? Describe the situation and write a dialogue with that person.
4. Do you find it hard to forgive yourself when you fall under your burdens?
5. Have you ever fled from ties that seemed too burdensome?
7. List the sources you have which enable you to bear more than you think you can.
THE MYSTERY OF THE CRUCIFIXION: RELATING TO THE END

And they brought him to the place called Golgatha and they offered him wine mingled with myrrh; but he did not take it. And they crucified him, and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. And it was the third hour, when they crucified him. And the inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads, and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself and come down from the cross!"

So also the chief priests mocked him to one another with the scribes, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe."

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama Sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:22-34)

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus remember me when you come in your kingly power." And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:39-43)

So the soldiers did this; but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. (John 19: 25-27)

And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last. . . . And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was a son of God!" (Mark 15: 36-39)

But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. (John 19: 33-34)

Meditation on the Crucifixion

Here is what our Holy Mother tells me about this story:
“I AM MARY, MOTHER OF JESUS.

“LAST TIME WE MET, I ASKED HIM, ‘JESUS, MY SON, SHALL WE BE TOGETHER FOR THE PASSOVER?’ HE STARED AT ME HARD AND SAID, ‘YES, MY MOTHER.’ ‘AND WHERE SHALL IT BE SO THAT YOU CAN JOIN ME?’ ‘I DO NOT KNOW WHERE IT SHALL BE YET. I WILL HAVE IT MADE KNOWN TO YOU.’ NOW IT IS PASSOVER AND I CANNOT FIND HIM. I KNOW HE IS IN JERUSALEM SOMEWHERE BUT I AM TOLD HE IS HIDDEN.

“ALL THROUGH THE CEREMONIES, DREADFUL IMAGES PASS THROUGH MY MIND. THEY ARE CUTTING UP THE LAMB AT THE TABLE AND I SEE MY JESUS, LIKE ISAAC, BEING TIED DOWN FOR THE SACRIFICE. I CANNOT SLEEP THIS NIGHT. AT DAWN I AM PACING THE HOUSE OF MY KINSPERSON. I WISH JOSEPH WERE WITH ME.

“NOW MARY, MOTHER OF CLOPAS, COMES TO TELL ME TO MAKE HASTE. WE MUST GO TO MM. SHE CANNOT BEAR TO TELL ME, BUT I KNOW WHERE THE ROAD IS LEADING. WHEN JESUS AND I USED TO PASS NEAR THE HILL ON OUR PILGRIMAGES, WE WOULD STOP TO PRAY FOR THE MISERABLE ONES HANGING ON THEIR CROSSES. JESUS WOULD KISS THEIR FEET AND WIPE AWAY THE BLOOD AS I DID.

“MY HEART STOPS BEATING WHEN I RECOGNIZE HIS BELOVED FORM. HE IS NAKED. WHERE IS THE TUNIC WITHOUT SEAM I MADE TO COVER HIM FOREVER WITH MY LOVE?

“NO! THE PAIN IS TOO GREAT FOR ME TO BEAR! MY BELOVED ONLY SON. HIS GAZE IS SEARCHING MINE. HE WANTS ME TO SHARE HIS AGONY, BUT NOT TO GIVE WAY. IT IS SO IMPORTANT TO HIM THAT TOGETHER WE MAKE THIS MOMENT A GIFT OF LOVE TO THE FATHER. I REMEMBER THAT HE TOLD ME IT MUST BE THIS WAY, BUT I WOULD NOT BELIEVE IT.

“MY KINSWOMAN AND I TAKE TURNS HOLDING EACH OTHER. I SEEM TO BE DEAD FROM AGONY, BUT STILL HIS WORDS SINK DEEP AS THEY ALWAYS HAVE. ‘MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME?’ WE ALWAYS PRAYED THE PSALMS TOGETHER. I KNOW HE IS THINKING OF THE VICTORY WHEN IT IS OVER AND THIS IS WHAT GIVES HIM COURAGE.

“The words of Simeon in the temple are flowing back to me. Your heart shall be pierced. Yes, it is true! For any mother what dagger is sharper than to see a child die before her eyes? ‘A light to the gentiles, a glory to our people, Israel.’ I clutch the prophecies to my breast.

“'WOMAN, BEHOLD THY SON.' HE IS CALLING ME WOMAN BECAUSE I WAS ALL WOMEN TO HIM. I AM THE NEW EVE, AND MOTHER OF THE KINGDOM. HE TAUGHT ME TO BE MOTHER TO BE MOTHER TO ALL, EVEN TO HIS BELOVED MARY MAGDALENE, NOW WEEPING AT HIS FEET, WASHING HIS FEET WITH HER TEARS AGAIN. I CANNOT COMFORT HER NOW. SHE IS ENGULFED IN HER PAIN, TOTALLY ONE WITH HIS PAIN. 'SON, BEHOLD THY MOTHER.' GOOD JOHN, THE ONE CLOSEST TO THE HIDDEN SECRETS OF MY SON'S HEART, IS HOLDING ME TIGHTER. I LOVE JOHN. SURROUNDED BY HIS STRENGTH I LET MYSELF SINK INTO THE PAIN.

“I HEAR THE VOICE OF THE CENTURION. JESUS TAUGHT ME TO LOVE EVEN THE ROMANS. 'BENEATH THAT BRUTAL ARMOUR HE TENDER HEARTS IN NEED OF THE BALM OF YOUR PRAYERS,' HE TOLD ME. THE CENTURION IS SAYING, 'SURELY HE WAS THE SON OF GOD!'

“'WAS! WAS! IT IS CONSUMMATED! LET ME HOLD HIM AT LAST. I WILL KISS HIS WOUNDS AND WASH THE BLOOD OFF OF HIS FACE WITH MY TEARS. THE SON BELongs AGAIN TO HIS MOTHER.'

Afraid of death - the final one, and all the lesser ones of rejection, loss, aging, etc., I tend to flee to a fantasy world where there are no crosses and paradise is free - or so it may appear.

At other times, I rail against my cross, screaming out anger and fear as I writhe on my cross like the other unredeemed thief beside Jesus.

But new life comes to us on earth through the cross. We ought not refuse the healing balm of confessing our sins, preferring instead to believe that the burden of guilt can be lifted by the shrug of a shoulder or a slippery excuse. Sometimes we accept the gift of forgiveness in our innermost hearts, but fail to make outward revelation of our guilt; and then our comfort is less. Ultimately, satisfying liberation from death and suffering can be found only in the cross, so that one can rejoice with the saints, "Oh happy fault which called forth such a Savior!"

And in the end, death, too, is a mother holding us in her arms in our last agony, carrying us to the waiting embrace of the Father.
The Crucifixion: Relating to the End

1. Write a description of what you would like your dying to be like. Who would you like there? What would you like your last words to be?
2. If you have witnessed a death, describe this event and your feelings about it.
3. Have you ever been able to experience yourself as so united to God that you could relate to everyone, even "enemies," with his love?
4. Go through the last words of Jesus and make them your own by remembering the moments in which you have experienced similar realities. (For example, what would you will to your friends in the way that Jesus gave Mary to John and John to Mary?)
5. Write a fantasy in which death comes to you as a mother calling you home. Tell her your fears; hear her answers.
And when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back; for it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe; and they were amazed. And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you." And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mark 16:1-8)

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran, and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Peter then came out with the other disciple, and they went toward the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first; and stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and he went into the tomb; he saw the linen cloths lying, and the napkin, which had been on his head, not lying with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Saying this she turned round and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and
"your God." Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20:1-18)

**Meditation on the Resurrection**

Mary seems to say:

"I AM MARY, THE MOTHER OF THE ONE WHO DIED ON THE CROSS. I WANTED TO DIE WITH HIM. WHY DIDN'T HE LET ME DIE WITH HIM?

"I DO NOT HAVE TO ASK LONG. MISSING THEIR JESUS AND OVERWHELMED BY GUILT, THEY ARE COMING TO ME, ONE BY ONE, WEEPING ON MY BREAST, SEEKING HIS FORGIVENESS THROUGH MINE.

"HE SAID IT WOULD BE TERRIBLE DURING THIS TIME. NOW I KNOW WHAT HE MEANT. BUT HE ALSO SAID THAT THERE WOULD BE VICTORY FOR US, AND THAT I HAVE YET TO FULLY UNDERSTAND. IS THE VICTORY TO BE HERE NOW OR ONLY LATER IN HEAVEN? IS WHAT WE ARE WITNESSING THE END OF THE DREAM OF THE MESSIAH? THAT AFTER HE HAS COME AND GONE ALL WILL APPEAR AS IF HE HAD NEVER COME?

THEN I BEGIN TO FEEL HIS PRESENCE; IT IS GROWING STRONGER AND STRONGER. ARE THE OTHERS FEELING IT ALSO? SOME OF THE WOMEN ARE LEAVING TO GO TO THE GRAVE. I WOULD LIKE TO GO WITH THEM, BUT MY FLESH IS TOO WEAK. I CANNOT MOVE AT ALL. I AM ROOTED IN ONE PLACE WHERE ALL THE CHILDREN CAN FIND ME.

OH MY SON! YOU ARE COMING TO THEM, TOO. AND NOW I MUST NOT ONLY COMFORT BUT SUSTAIN AND ENCOURAGE THEM IN THIS JOY THAT IS SO GREAT THAT IT THREATENS TO BE TOO BIG FOR THEIR SOULS. MY BROKEN, OPEN-HEARTED MARY MAGDALENE HAS SEEN HIM! SHE TRUSTS IN HER VISION UTTERLY. HAS HE NOT YET ASCENDED TO THE FATHER? BUT HE WILL SEE THE REST ON THE ROAD TO GALILEE!

"HELP ME UP MY CHILDREN, FOR WE MUST ALL REJOICE! HE IS RISEN, AS HE HAD PROMISED US! GLORY, GLORY, GLORY!"

The words from the Resurrection scene that have always intrigued me most are the famous "Do not touch me."

What do they imply? First, that before His death Mary Magdalene was privileged to touch Him. He was not a distant figure. Someday He will touch you and me as well, and even now does so in a spiritual way in sacrament and prayer and also by means of human hands.

Yet the words, "Do not touch me, I have not yet ascended to the Father," also symbolize the way our experience of God goes back and forth between felt closeness
and faith in the God behind the veil. "Why? Why? Why?" I used to ask, appalled that the Jesus who had come so near now seemed more a word than a person.

Mary Magdalene's tale and also Mother Mary's have an answer for me. He withdraws so that they may go to minister to him in the brothers and sisters who will form his Mystical Body. If we were always caught up in ecstasy, what would give us the impetus to look for love in other creatures? After all, the trip to heaven is not to be a solo voyage, but a pilgrimage in company. And arrival is not only an embrace of a hermit with a lonely God, but rather a joyful banquet of all with their common Savior.

Discovering the elements of this mystery in love between a man and a woman, we find a tension between the desire to grab and hold onto each other (lust or possessiveness) and the recognition that love is a gift for the lover but also for the community (marriage leads to family).

The young contemplative longs for mystical union with God, but learns that true happiness on earth is meeting him in the graces of the ordinary as well. So, too, the passionate erotic lover renounces conquest for the tender, steady fire of creative marriage where touch has times and seasons.

Only in eternity will perfect love embrace all longings as all become one.

The Resurrection: Touching Again

1. Make a list of beautiful things your hands have touched
2. Describe in detail your most profound experience of touching or being touched.
3. Have you ever been comforted by the touch of a stranger?
4. In your family, were you free to touch? Are you inclined to snuggle close to others or keep a distance?
5. Recall peak experiences of being comforted by touching.
6. Do you fear that any physical contact can become sexually illicit?
7. Are you moving now towards greater or less touching?
8. The Church has always used touching in her rituals - anointing, blessing. What is your feeling about the kiss of peace? Touching strangers? Germs from the chalice?
9. What is your favorite scriptural account of Jesus touching someone?
10. Have you ever been "grabbed" instead of touched? Have you yourself grabbed someone instead of touching them tenderly?
11. Make a list of "deaths" in your life - inner and outer events that brought mourning and loss. Then list what gift of resurrection came, if it did so.
12. What are the "old forms" in your relationships to family, work, and Church that you have difficulty letting go of? Dialogue with Jesus about this.
THE MYSTERY OF THE ASCENSION: COMING HOME

To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God. And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father which, he said, "you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away; and when they had entered, they went up to the upper room where they were staying. . . . All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer. (Acts 1:3-14)

Meditation on the Ascension

Mary describes how:

"WE ARE ALL ASSEMBLED ON THE MOUNTAIN FOR THE LAST FAREWELL. SADNESS MINGLES WITH AWE, FOR WHO HAS SEEN SUCH A LEAVE-TAKING SINCE ELIJAH'S?! IT IS A MOMENT OF TRIUMPHANT GLORY FOR ME, ALTHOUGH I AM SADDENED THAT I WILL NOT SEE HIS TRANSFIGURED, LUMINOUS FACE UNTIL MY END HAS COME.

"AFTER-HE ROSE FROM THE GRAVE, MAD CONFUSION AS WELL AS JOYOUS VICTORY OVERCAME THE DISCIPLES. FIRST, THEY WERE JUMPY WITH PANIC, NOT KNOWING WHAT THEY WERE TO DO. THE CITY WAS TEEMING WITH WILD RUMORS. GROUPS GATHERED IN SWARMS AROUND ANYONE WHO KNEW HIM SO AS TO DISCOVER WHETHER THE INCREDIBLE NEWS OF HIS RISING WAS TRUE. MOREOVER, PEOPLE..."
WANTED TO KNOW IF THEY COULD MEET HIM. TO THIS WE COULD NOT ANSWER, BECAUSE JESUS WOULD APPEAR UNEXPECTEDLY, COMING AND GOING EVEN THROUGH CLOSED DOORS.

"WHEN "HE WAS AMONGST US, INSTRUCTED HIS DISCIPLES ABOUT WHAT WAS TO COME AND HOW TO GO ABOUT TEACHING HIS STORY. I LOVED TO LISTEN TO HIM AS HE TRACED THE HISTORY AND MEANING OF HIS COMING THROUGH THE HOLY BOOKS. HE SPOKE TO ME WHEN THE OTHERS SLEPT, FOR I WAS ALWAYS AWAKE WHEN HE WANTED ME. HE TOLD ME MANY SECRETS OF THE KINGDOM AND OF THE TIMES WHEN THEY WOULD BE REVEALED TO MAN, IN ORDER THAT I MIGHT BE PREPARED. I WAS TO CHANNEL THE NEEDS AND HOPES OF MAN TO GOD AND GOD TO MAN THROUGH THE HIDDEN PATHWAYS OF INNER PRAYER. I WAS TO BE THE PURE LIGHT OF JESUS IN THE WORLD SO THAT THOSE WHO WOULD COME TO ME WOULD LEAVE ME STRENGTHENED.

"NOW HE IS EMBRACING EACH OF US, WITH EXTRA WARMTH FOR THE ONES WHO NEED IT MOST, ESPECIALLY PETER, WHO WILL BE THE ROCK OF HIS KINGDOM.

"THEY TOLD ME LATER IS WAS LIKE THE TIME OF HIS TRANSFIGURATION ON MOUNT TABOR, WHEN HE STOOD, GLORIOUS, WHITE AS SNOW, CONVERSING WITH MOSES AND ELIJAH. HIS ALREADY TRANSLUCENT BODY SHONE BRIGHTER AND BRIGHTER UNTIL TIE THEN STREAKED UP IN A BLINDING FLASH OF LIGHT INTO THE HEAVENS. WE STARED UPWARDS, EACH ONE OF US SHARING THE SAME THOUGHT: WHEN WOULD WE BE FOLLOWING AND JOINING HIM? AND THEN AN ANGEL CAME AND TOLD US TO RETURN TO THE CITY.

"MY SOUL IS DAZED AND MY SPIRIT WAITS IN DELIGHTED ANTICIPATION FOR THE TIME WHEN I AND MY DEAR CHILDREN WILL RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT ASIDE PROMISED. I, KNOWING HIS GIFT, AM EAGER TO SEE MY CHILDREN GROW IN GRACE AND TRUTH.

"COME LET US SING AS WE WALK TOWARDS THE HOLY CITY. THE LORD HAS RISEN AND WE ARE RISING TOWARDS HIM, FOREVER AND EVER."

The eternal home is pure gift. We cannot merit it, although we may reject it. C.S. Lewis conjectured that heaven and hell are not two different places with different aims. There is one eternity, God, and for some, his absolute love is hell; for others, heaven.

But what if we hate to regard our happiness as gift and want it instead to be our own achievement? Then we refuse the mystery of the Ascension and seek a God within ourselves, controllable by ourselves. We make our own experiences into deities for worship. We buy pseudo-eternity of sensual, emotional, and spiritual thrills, as
something we can have and manipulate rather than receive from a being higher than ourselves.

Another type of refusal of the eternal home is what Soren Kierkegaard in *The Sickness unto Death* called the despair of finitude. Afraid that the eternal homeland may be a hoax, we cling fiercely to the reality of the here and now. We imagine that certain earthly goods can satisfy forever, and, when these fail to do so, we seek new kinds of satisfaction. When all fails, we curse life, but still refuse to raise our eyes toward the heavens.

So what can the account of the Ascension mean to those who no longer believe in an eternal afterlife, to those whose life is but a roundtrip from nothingness to nothingness? What does eternity mean anyhow? *Eternity* - that word has always thrilled me, even as an atheist when I yet had no knowledge of a heavenly destiny.

I regard eternity not as a dissolution of time, but rather as the temporal rolled up into a perfect point of ecstasy in which all things become unified in the heart of God. How do I know? I have glimpsed it in my own experience of moments when time seems to stop and all the beauty and goodness and love and truth of the world are gathered up and concentrated into one brilliant vision and explosion of feeling. It can happen anywhere, anytime. Sometimes it has happened at the ocean or on a mountaintop, but just as easily at the sight of a familiar object on a busy day. The ordinary things become suffused with the presence of the absolute. "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God," wrote Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

My vision of eternity was very philosophical in quality until C.S. Lewis's writings "baptized my imagination" with visions of the new heaven and the new earth full of all the beautiful things that I love on earth tinctured with the light of God's glory and destiny given to them.

Once I looked up *eternity* in the Catholic Encyclopedia. I was amazed by the number of descriptions it offered. On so important an issue, theologians have long differed in explanations. Some stress the beatific vision, a pure absorption in the glory of God, and others, the transformation of the natural world to full obedience to the Creator who can then reign as true Lord. St. Thomas Aquinas upholds both views, for within their union with God, all good things on earth will be known and fully enjoyed.

Eternity is the beatific vision, the most abundant life possible to creatures, the return to the mother, as well as to the father.

**The Ascension: Coming Home**

1. When have you pursued emotional or spiritual thrills in the fear that God's eternal promises will be false? What was the result?
2. Recall those moments when you wished that you could just enjoy this life without having to seek the eternal dimension. What changed this wish?
3. Do you see your own body as beautiful? That of the opposite sex?
4. List some important body memories from childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Then write a letter to your body describing how you feel about being with it for all eternity. Do you feel it is worthy of eternity?
5. List the moments in your life when you have experienced "glory."
THE MYSTERY OF THE DESCENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT:
LOVING UNCONDITIONALLY

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. And they were amazed and wondered, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappodocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." And all were amazed and perplexed. . . . And he [Peter] testified with many other words and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. (Acts 2:1-12, 40-41)

Meditation on the Descent of the Holy Spirit
Mary relates:

"WE ARE IN THE UPPER ROOM AGAIN, ALL TOGETHER: THE DISCIPLES OF JESUS, MARY MAGDALENE AND THE OTHER WOMEN JESUS LOVED, AND MYSELF. THE PRESSURE IS GROWING UPON US TO MOVE OUTSIDE, TO TAKE THE DARING PLUNGE AND PROCLAIM THE GOOD NEWS OPENLY TO ALL IN THE STREETS. I HAVE BEEN RESTRAINING THEM, GENTLY BUT FIRMLY REMINDING THEM THAT JESUS TOLD THEM TO WAIT FOR THE HOLY SPIRIT. BUT THEY CAN HARDLY BEAR TO WAIT ANY LONGER.

"AND NOW WE ARE GATHERED TOGETHER, PRAYING. SUDDENLY, A WIND SWEEPS AROUND THE ROOM AND SOMETHING LIKE FLAMES OF FIRE COME POURING DOWN UPON US! WE BEGIN TO WEEP AND GROAN, EXPLODING IN NEW TONGUES! THE ROOM CAN NO LONGER CONTAIN
US AND WE FLING OURSELVES OUT OF THE ROOM, FEARLESSLY,
JOYOUSLY PROCLAIMING THE MESSAGE OF GLORY, GLORY, GLORY!
THOUSANDS FROM THE WONDERING CROWD WHO GATHERED TO
LISTEN TO US ARE ADDED TO JESUS' FOLLOWERS THAT DAY. THE
POWER OF THE KINGDOM IS UPON US NOW. I EMBRACE EACH SON AND
DAUGHTER AND BLESS THEM ALL. I AM THE MOTHER OF THE CHURCH."

What is the fire-rain of new life in the Holy Spirit that comes after tears of emptiness? When I first became Catholic, the terms used to name the gifts of the Holy Spirit were largely unknown. I had never heard of tongues, interpretation, prophecy, or healing, much less imagined the possibility of their manifesting themselves in modern times. Elaborate analogical explanations were used to make these biblical terms relevant to modern ears.

Then the revival of Pentecostal movements in Protestant and Catholic circles alike transformed the situation, making these "terms" burning realities for me and many other Christians.

But whatever our experience of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, St. Paul, the greatest charismatic Christian of them all, insisted that the most important gift of the Holy Spirit is love. "Love," Paul wrote, "is patient; love is kind. Love is not jealous, it does not put on airs, it is not snobbish. Love is never rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not prone to anger; neither does it brood over injuries. Love does not rejoice in what is wrong but rejoices with the truth. There is no limit to love's forbearance, to its trust, its hope, its power to endure." (1 Cor. 13:4-7)

Love is the chief gift of the Holy Spirit. "Love never fails. Prophecies will cease, tongues will be silent, knowledge will pass away. Our knowledge is imperfect and our prophesying is imperfect." (1 Cor. 13:8-10) And blessed with an abundance of such a gift as the Holy Spirit, the greatest fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit upon us will also be love.

How do the gifts of the Holy Spirit mesh with the fruits, which include, besides love, "joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness, and chastity." (Galatians 5:22) How can searing fire bring forth soothing spring rains? The secret is cyclic. The yearning for the Spirit, for God, fills us and then overflows in tender concern for others.

This process of spiritual alchemy may be refused for quite different reasons: "We may refuse from the spirit of compromise which calls for only a small flame so as not to disturb the tranquility of serving mammon; or we may refuse by the roaring fire of fanaticism which is devoid of any cooling, calming waters for oneself or for others. In fanaticism, we bring to the lives of others a fire that, rather than enkindling or inspiring enthusiasm for God, ravages them in our merciless, single-minded determination to root out all evil. We become St. Paul before the Damascus encounter. Our fire blinds us and destroys others. Finally, we can cling to so-called private visions that we have received from the Holy Spirit. Rather than revealing them to the world when called upon to do so, or growing spiritually as a result of them to better love and serve others, we choose to hoard them miserly to ourselves for personal comfort and satisfaction.
The Descent of the Holy Spirit: Loving Unconditionally

1. Recall rooms where you have locked yourself away in fear.
2. What rooms within you now need unlocking, warming, loosening by the Spirit?
3. Have you ever experienced being loved unconditionally by anyone? Describe this person who so love(s) you.
4. List the reasons you won't love yourself unconditionally. Write a dialogue with the Holy Spirit about this list.
5. When have you been conscious of receiving a gift of the Holy Spirit? When of rejecting it?
6. Recall when you have experienced the Church as a homeland of hearts.
7. Do you see yourself as a comforter or a crusader in the Church?
8. Do you think of those who choose differently from you in this regard as threats or comrades?
The Mystery of Assumption Bringing the Mother Home

Meditation on the Assumption

I am Mary. Years have passed since I witnessed the coming of the Holy Spirit in the upper chamber. My sons and daughters have scattered in all directions stretching out to the glorious dance of grace. Here I remain in the heart of the holy city, contemplating the kingdom of heaven and earth.

Some days I feel so close to my son now in heaven that my feet seem to leave the earth. Other days I am so close to the daily struggles of his mission that I seem to be rooted and bound in earth.

Oh, the angel has come again! As he came to me at the beginning of my son's story on earth. "Hail, full of grace, blessed art thou!" In a few months, he proclaims, the Holy Spirit will overshadow me and I shall see my son again in glory. In full glory this time! The heavens will open and I will be lifted up, body and soul, like my son, to him.

But until then, I must bid the earth farewell. As I wait, my gaze searches the earth for all that is worthy of heaven. I will bring to God the lilies of the field, the birds of the air, the hearts of the loving, the sorrows of the poor, the innocence of children. And when the time has come for my departure, the angels will come to take me up from my poor pallet. I will have embraced my children for the last time and fallen asleep, to awake under the shelter of wings being drawn up by dancing angels to my eternal home where my son reigns in glory. Glory to God in the highest: God, the Father, son, and Holy Spirit! Alleluia!
I have always envisioned the Assumption as the climax of a dance. Mary, suspended between earth and heaven, is the ballerina being lifted up, her back arched over the uplifted arms of her partner.

In the perfect moments of dance performances, the body and spirit become one as both leap in harmony with the soaring crescendos of passionate melodies. Audiences count the number of seconds a dancer can remain elevated in the air before descending. Grace of form evokes grace of spirit. At the apex of all grace, why should not the body and spirit finally soar into eternity? “The pure souls shall mount on native wings, disdaining little sport, and cut a path into the heaven of glory, leaving a track of light for men to wonder at,” wrote William Blake.

The doctrine of the resurrection of the body, proclaimed every Sunday in countless recitations of the Creed, is still strange to people so repulsed at the thought, and even more the sight, of corpses. It is much easier to imagine souls flying to heaven than bodies mysteriously transfigured leaping up to join their soul-mates on the last day!

The scriptures shine light on the mystery. Jesus after his Resurrection had a body that was hard to recognize as the one which he had before he died, yet this resurrected body was firm enough to be probed, and could eat and drink. “The mystery of the Assumption teaches us that in Mary, the transfiguration of the cosmos, the principle of which lies in the Resurrection of Christ, has already begun to produce its effect. The Assumption is the dawn of the new creation whose first rays filter through into the darkness of the world,” wrote Jean Danielou.

Those who reject life after death usually cling with desperate fingers to what can be seen and touched. They cannot release themselves to the stream that takes them to destinations unknown. Those who reject the body insult the Creator who insisted that what He lovingly created was good. Why does man exist as matter in a material world at all if only his spirit counts to God? The Assumption of Our Lady is shrouded in mystery. An apocryphal fourth century book of that name described it in detail. The doctrine appears to have sprung from common belief among early Christians. Theologians derive it from the implications of the immaculate conception: if Mary is full of grace, as Luke describes the angel Gabriel proclaiming, then she is free of original sin, and thus not subject to the punishment of having her body corrupt on earth before being raised on the last day. She is said to have fallen into a death-like sleep called the Dormition by the Fathers of the Church, and then disappeared, body and soul, into heaven.

For the development of Christian spirituality, the doctrine of the Assumption has profound consequences. All creation was groaning for redemption and Mary’s ascent prefigures the time when all that is good of the earth will be drawn up into heaven. At that time man’s body, rather than being discarded for the next waltz, will become the most graceful instrument conceivable to perform the dance of union with God for all eternity.
THE MYSTERY OF THE CROWNING OF MARY QUEEN OF HEAVEN: FULL CIRCLE

And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery. And another portent appeared in heaven; behold a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, and that he might devour her child when she brought it forth; she brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which to be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days. (Rev. 12:1-6)

Meditation on the Crowning of Mary Queen of Heaven
Let me begin my response to this mystery with praise:

PRAISE YOU, VIRGIN MARY, WHO LET THE STRONG BE WEAK; PRAISE YOU, MOTHER MARY, WHO MADE THE WEAK STRONG. PRAISE YOU, VIRGIN MARY, WHO CRUSHED THE SERPENT’S HEAD; PRAISE YOU, MOTHER MARY, REFUGE OF SINNERS. PRAISE YOU, VIRGIN MARY, BRIDE OF THE SPIRIT; PRAISE YOU, MOTHER MARY, MOTHER OF THE LIVING AND THE DEAD. PRAISE YOU, VIRGIN MARY, LAMP OF ISRAEL; PRAISE YOU, MOTHER MARY, STAR OF THE KINGDOM.

OH, MARY, TEACH YOUR DAUGHTERS TO BELIEVE IN GLORY, YOURS AND OURS!

TAKE AWAY OUR SELF-DENIGRATING AND DESPAIRING DISBELIEF.

HELP US TO PLACE OUR SORROWS IN YOUR LAP.

FOR THE JOYS YOU OFFER US ARE FRAGRANT FLOWERS IN YOUR HAIR,

AND THE GLORIES YOU BESTOW ON US, GEMS IN YOUR CROWN!

OH, MARY, IT IS WITH LITANIES THAT WE YOUR CHILDREN CROWN YOU, OVERWHELMED WITH THE EXTRAVAGANCE OF YOUR GIFTS.

WE MURMUR OVER AND OVER QUEEN, MOTHER, ROSE, TOWER OF IVORY,
SEAT OF WISDOM, AS IN THE LITANY I NOW SING ANEW:

LITANY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

LORD, HAVE MERCY ON US. CHRIST, HAVE MERCY ON US.

CHRIST, HEAR US. CHRIST, GRACIOUSLY HEAR US.

GOD, THE FATHER OF HEAVEN, HAVE MERCY ON US.

GOD, THE SON, REDEEMER OF THE WORLD, HAVE MERCY ON US.

GOD, THE HOLY SPIRIT, HAVE MERCY ON US.

HOLY TRINITY, ONE GOD, HAVE MERCY ON US.

HOLY MARY, PRAY FOR US. (REPEAT AFTER EACH INVOCATION)

HOLY MOTHER OF GOD,
HOLY VIRGIN OF VIRGINS,
MOTHER OF CHRIST,
MOTHER OF DIVINE GRACE,
MOTHER MOST PURE,
MOTHER MOST CHASTE,
MOTHER INVOLATE,
MOTHER UNDEFILED,
MOTHER MOST AMIABLE,
MOTHER MOST ADMIRABLE,
MOTHER OF GOOD COUNSEL,
MOTHER OF OUR CREATOR,
MOTHER OF OUR SAVIOR,
VIRGIN MOST PRUDENT,
VIRGIN MOST VENERABLE,
VIRGIN MOST RENOWNED,
VIRGIN MOST POWERFUL,
VIRGIN MOST MERCIFUL,
VIRGIN MOST FAITHFUL,
MIRROR OF JUSTICE,
SEAT OF WISDOM,
CAUSE OF OUR JOY,
SPIRITUAL VESSEL,
VESSEL OF HONOR,
SINGULAR VESSEL OF DEVOTION,
MYSTICAL ROSE,
TOWER OF DAVID,
TOWER OF IVORY,
HOUSE OF GOLD,
ARK OF THE COVENANT,
GATE OF HEAVEN,
MORNING STAR,
HEALTH OF THE SICK,
REFUGE OF SINNERS,
COMFORTER OF THE AFFLICTED,
HELP OF CHRISTIANS,
QUEEN OF ANGELS,
QUEEN OF PATRIARCHS,
QUEEN OF PROPHETS,
QUEEN OF APOSTLES,
QUEEN OF MARTYRS,
QUEEN OF CONFESSORS,
QUEEN OF VIRGINS,
QUEEN OF ALL SAINTS,
QUEEN CONCEIVED WITHOUT ORIGINAL SIN,
QUEEN ASSUMED INTO HEAVEN,
QUEEN OF THE MOST HOLY ROSARY,
QUEEN OF PEACE.

LAMB OF GOD, WHO TAKE AWAY THE SINS OF THE WORLD,

SPARE US, O LORD.

LAMB OF GOD, WHO TAKE AWAY THE SINS OF THE WORLD,

GRACIOUSLY HEAR US, O LORD.

LAMB OF GOD, WHO TAKE AWAY THE SINS OF THE WORLD,

HAVE MERCY ON US.

In conclusion, I will write more about my personal experience of Mary, my Queen.

My wonder at you, Mary, began before my conversion.

The first statue I saw of the Virgin Mary was on the campus of Fordham University in New York. I was startled that a college would have a statue, not of Einstein or Newton or Plato, but, instead, of a robed figure, half-child, half-woman, doing nothing except extending her palms upward in a gesture of receptivity.

As I got to know Catholic men, I was amazed at the attachment they had for the mysterious Mary. My godfather could not pass a picture of Mary without tears filling his eyes. Tough Catholic boys carried rosaries in the frayed pockets of their jeans next to their knives. Why? Reflecting on the words of the rosary prayer, “... blessed is the fruit of your womb .... Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death ...” I came to understand that man, who has no womb, was yet born from a womb and ever seeks the protective warmth of the feminine. He turns to the women in his life and to his heavenly mother to heal the wounds the world has inflicted on him. The feminine teaches him to put love before the competitiveness he falls into in pursuing his role as provider. The figure of the heavenly mother on the altar draws him out of weariness into the hope of the promises of the kingdom where there will be for all, women and men, no more toil and tears, only joy!

Paintings of Mary have played a crucial role in my life. I love the famous Botticelli Annunciation where the angel starts the dance and Mary bends backwards in ecstasy. I love the flaming Grunewald Madonna, with her flowing blondish-red hair, in a brilliant red velvet gown, her eyes gazing down in utterly peaceful joy at the gift of God held in her long slender hands. Most of all, I love the unfinished sepia-colored Da Vinci Nativity. I, an untamed sensual girl, first discovered the beauty of purity by gazing at the simple, girlish outline of this virgin Madonna in a museum in Florence, Italy, and shed the tears that began the cleansing of my heart.

At Fordham University, Father Donceel, the well-known Jesuit theologian-philosopher, used to begin the class with the Our Father followed by the phrase, "Seat of Wisdom, pray for us." I was perplexed. What was the seat of wisdom? Oh, that woman, Mary. How could a village girl without any graduate degrees be the seat of wisdom?!

Then I learned about contemplation. I had never heard of the word before. I was told that the lyrical, poetic side of me, with its luminous images hidden deep in my heart, this soft blissful inner-me, counted as much, if not more, than the me who churned out term paper after term paper of well-organized concepts. Deep within me was the source of wisdom. Joy, joy, joy!

Your title "Our Lady, Star of the Sea" also attracted me. I have rarely been at sea, but the name "Our Lady, Star of the Sea" on churches in beach towns has always moved me: the contrast between the raging waves and the still, silent woman - the image of strong men in small boats
rowing towards the harbor, towards the waiting woman, glowing in the darkness, hands outstretched in welcome. The feminine is the refuge.

The child flees from the danger of the streets to home which means Mama. Before descending into the fiery waves of nightmare images, babies must be tucked snugly into bed by Mother. They must know that anytime in the night they can flee to the parental bed. Even as adults, in fright they call for Mama.

The universal need for refuge and comfort: is it to be scorned as weak, whining self-pity? I think not. Self-pity is nurtured in lonely brooding. The one who acknowledges her vulnerability and fear and feels reassured in the fact that there are mothers to tend her wounds, is far less prone to whining.

I resented it when the often sentimental statues of Mary were pitched out of the churches, to be replaced by jagged, triangular glass shapes, coldly beautiful, but chilling for the child in man. Then Mother Mary came back to me personally in the form of the women of the prayer groups, encircling the heaving, battered forms of each other with embraces of compassion. I became mother over and over again kissing the cheeks of women whose tears had smeared away their cosmetic masks and of men whose stoicism cracked at the miraculous touch of sisters and brothers who were unafraid to be tender. Soothed, they were ready to join us in the circle to rescue the next supplicant.

Dear Mother Mary, I hear you chant this lullaby to me:

COME TO ME, DAUGHTER OF EVE,
SEEK SHELTER UNDER MY WINGS.
LET MY MOTHERING ENVELOP YOU.
BECOME YOURSELF MOTHER TO OTHERS, THEN;
BE NOT FOREVER NURTURED, BUT NURTURE.
AND BRING THE CHILDREN OF YOUR LOVE THROUGH YOUR MOTHERHOOD TO THE MOTHER CHURCH.
AND TOGETHER, AS MOTHERS AND MOTHERED,
GIVING AND RECEIVING, RECEIVING AND GIVING,
EACH TO ONESelf AND OTHERS IN THEIR PROPER TIME,
YOU, YOUR CHILDREN AND MOTHER CHURCH, WILL JOURNEY TO THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN, WITH MOTHER, AS MOTHERS.
The Crowning of Mary Queen of Heaven: Full Circle

1. Select one of the titles of our Lady and reflect on its meaning for you. To which of your needs does it speak?
2. Make a list of homecomings in your life. Describe in detail the most moving.
3. Recall some time when you had some honor, admiration, or love publicly extended to you. Did you find it hard or easy to accept?
4. Write a fantasy describing what you would do if you were queen - how would you dress, walk, speak?
5. Read the Magnificat, which Mary sang at the Visitation; write the song Mary would sing as queen about her journey, her homecoming, her joy.
6. Can you believe in fullness for you? For the cosmos? What are your images of eternity?