

WEEK THREE

Something's Broken

This week, we begin what Ignatius calls the **First Week** of his Exercises. By “week,” Ignatius does not mean seven calendar days, but a particular movement or phase of the retreat. Most broadly, the First Week focuses on our experience of sin – personally, communally, and globally. Sin can be described in many ways: as a breakdown of a relationship with God and others; as a failure to love God, others, and self; as a turning away from God.

Sin is an inescapable reality of the human condition; we abuse the freedom God gives us and make choices that hurt God, others, and ourselves. God does not punish us for our sins; instead, we suffer the natural consequences that flow from our sinful choices and the sinful choices of others.

In the meditations this week, we look closely at sin and how it plays out in every human heart. Our aim is not to become mired in guilt, self-hate, or despair. Instead, we ask for a healthy sense of shame and confusion when confronting the reality of sin. Knowing how good God is to us, how and why do we still choose to sin, still choose to respond so meagerly to God's generosity?

Even as we recognize these hard realities, we remember that God loves us unconditionally and wants to free us from anything that blocks our growing into the people God calls us to be. We don't get very far just by counting our sins and trying to overcome them by sheer force of will. Instead, we need to keep our eyes fixed on God's ever-present mercy, which is the ultimate source of our lasting liberation from sin.

Day One: The Sin of Adam and Eve

Biblical scholarship has long held that the story of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis is not history, but a theological reflection by the people of Israel on the reality of good and evil. This story speaks a timeless truth known to all humanity: human beings, like the angels, enjoy the gift of freedom, yet we sometimes choose to abuse that freedom by trying to put ourselves at the center of creation and displacing God. This is the essence of original sin.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following grace: a healthy sense of shame and confusion before God as I consider the effects of sin in my life, my community, and my world.

Read Genesis Chapter 3

Prayerfully read the story of Adam and Eve.

What do you learn about the nature of sin and the effects of sin? Notice how subtle evil can be and how alluring the temptation to avoid responsibility. Consider some of your own sinful choices. In your journal, note any emotional responses to your considerations of sin.

For Reflection

Rev. Michael Himes of Boston College has an interesting take on this age-old story. The first chapter of Genesis tells us that human beings were created in the image and likeness of God and that God called our creation very good. The temptation of Adam and Eve is to disbelieve that good news and refuse to accept our innate goodness and the goodness of others. Instead, they think that they must do something else to become like God or become valuable in God's eyes. Consider all the evil effects that flow from not accepting the inherent goodness and dignity of each person.

– Kevin O'Brien, SJ

Journal

Journal your feelings, thoughts, or impressions.

Day Two: The Sin of One Person

We have reflected on the original sin of Adam and Eve. Now we consider the effect of sin on one person—a person who chooses definitively against God. The person is the rich man in Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus. We imagine what it would be like for a person to be totally closed off from God's love.

Use your imagination as you reflect on this parable. You may want to craft a parable of your own, replacing the rich man and Lazarus with modern-day counterparts based on the current century's sad history of sin, violence, genocide, and injustice.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following grace: a healthy sense of shame and confusion before God as I consider the effects of sin in my life, my community, and my world.

Read Luke 16:19-31

Prayerfully read the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Ask: *When have I failed to notice or respond to the needs of others? When have I felt isolated from God or others by my own sin?*

For Reflection

A Colloquy

A Colloquy is an intimate conversation in prayer.

I try to experience the breadth and length and height and depth of hell—the despair of facing a cross with no one on it, the turning out upon a world which has no God, the total emptiness of living without purpose, an environment pervasive with hatred and self-seeking, a living death.

Once I have let the awfulness of this experience sink deep within me, I begin to talk to Christ our Lord about it. I talk to him about all the people who have lived—the many who lived before his coming and who deliberately closed in upon themselves and chose such a hell for all eternity, the many who walked with him in his own country and who rejected his call to love, the many who still keep rejecting the call to love and remain locked in their own chosen hell.

I give thanks to Jesus that he has not allowed me to fall into any of these groups, thus ending my life. All I can do is give thanks to him that up to this moment he has shown himself so loving and merciful to me. Then I close with an Our Father. (SE 66-71)

– Contemporary translation by David L. Fleming, SJ

Journal

Journal your feelings, thoughts, or impressions.

Day Three: What Have I Done for Christ?

Today we turn from reflection on sin to reflection on Jesus, who restored us to the Father. We consider the suffering Jesus on the cross.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following grace: a healthy sense of shame and confusion before God as I consider the effects of sin in my life, my community, and my world.

Read Romans 5:1-11

“God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”

For Reflection

A Meditation Before the Cross

Imagine Christ our Lord suspended on the cross before you, and converse with him in a colloquy: How is it that he, although he is the Creator, has come to make himself a human being? How is it that he has passed from eternal life to death here in time, and to die in this way for my sins?

In a similar way, reflect on yourself and ask:

What have I done for Christ?

What am I doing for Christ?

What ought I do for Christ?

In this way, too, gazing on him in so pitiful a state as he hangs on the cross, speak out whatever comes to your mind.

– *Spiritual Exercises* 53

Journal

Journal your feelings, thoughts, or impressions.

Day Four: The Parable of the Prodigal Son

Today we read the parable of the prodigal son, a story of sin, mercy, and forgiveness. In this parable, Jesus tells us who the Father is. Notice that the father in the parable is also prodigal – that is, extravagant – with his love. God is always trying to overcome separation. Notice the festivity of the parable. Realize how much joy it brings God when we return home.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: deepening awareness and sorrow for my sins and a heartfelt experience of God's merciful love for me.

Read Luke 15:11-32

Consider: How does Jesus' parable help me understand my own estrangement from God and others? How does it help me appreciate God's welcome to me, a sinner?

For Reflection

This Addict is a Saint

A friend of mine recently sent me an unusual holy card. It honors St. Mark Ji Tianxiang, a Chinese layman who was murdered in 1900, along with dozens of other Catholics in his village, in the vicious persecution of Christians during the Boxer rebellion. That's not the unusual thing. The Church has canonized many martyrs, including many Chinese martyrs. What's unusual about St. Mark is that he was an opium addict who was barred from receiving the sacraments for the last 30 years of his life.

Mark couldn't receive Communion because his addiction was regarded as gravely sinful and scandalous. He prayed for deliverance from his addiction, but deliverance never came. Nevertheless he remained a believing Catholic. At his trial he was given a chance to renounce his faith, but he refused. It is said that he sang the litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary as he was led to his execution.

Saints are exemplary people. The Church creates them so we can learn from them. So what can we learn from St. Mark Ji Tianxiang?

For starters, he shows that anybody can become a saint – even a man who was kicked out of the Church for giving public scandal. By canonizing him, the Church also signals

a different attitude toward addiction than the one St. Mark's pastors had a century ago. Drug abuse is sinful, but addiction is also a disease of the mind and body. Addicts today are not excluded from the sacraments because they are addicts.

I also marvel at St. Mark's confidence in the mercy of God. He probably shared the village's opinion of him – that he was a serious sinner who was behaving terribly. He must have felt despair in his futile struggles and perhaps some bitterness too. But he persevered in his faith. I suspect that in his brokenness he met the suffering Christ. In the end, he went to his death confidently, trusting that love would receive him. May we all imitate St. Mark.

– Jim Manney

Journal

Journal your feelings, thoughts, or impressions.

Day Five: My Own History of Sin

For the next two days you will reflect on your own history of sin. We aim for our understanding of sin to be heartfelt because conversion involves a change in thinking and feeling, in choosing and desiring. With this deepening understanding may come strong affective reactions, including sorrow for sins and gratitude for God's mercy.

Try to be very concrete. Note specific actions or patterns of acting that are sinful, and then go beneath actions or habits to discern the attitudes, tendencies, and intentions that cause them. We aim for a graced understanding that cuts to the heart.

This taking stock is not easy, but awareness is a grace when it leads us to freedom *from* a self-centered isolation and freedom *for* loving service of God and others.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: deepening awareness and sorrow for my sins and a heartfelt experience of God's merciful love for me.

A Meditation on Our Own Sins

Ignatius suggests that we use our memory to reflect on our particular history of sin. Notice the specificity of this exercise:

I will call to memory all the sins of my life, looking at them year by year or period by period. For this three things will be helpful: first, the locality or house where I lived; second, the associations which I had with others; third, the occupation I was pursuing. (SE 56)

The point here is not to rehearse every sinful moment of your life, which is impossible anyway. Instead, invite God to lead you through your life history and reveal those moments in which you failed to love God, others, or yourself. You may consider specific events or people, or reflect on more general attitudes or patterns of conduct.

In your reflection, notice the contagion of sin: how my sin affects my world and others around me.

You may wish to record your reflections in your journal.

A Colloquy of Mercy

End your time of prayer as Ignatius advises:

Conclude with a **colloquy of mercy** – conversing with God our Lord and thanking him for granting me life until now, and proposing, with his grace, amendment for the future. (SE 61)

Journal

Journal your feelings, thoughts, or impressions.

Day Six: Sorrow for Sin

Continue your meditation on sin today.

Remember that we do this heavy lifting in the context of having experienced ourselves as sinners who are loved. God seeks to free us from everything that gets in the way of loving ourselves, others, and God. The focus is not simply naming our sins, which can itself become a form of self-preoccupation. Instead, we focus on who God is and who we are before God. With this orientation, we discover the source of our liberation: the boundless mercy of God. We begin to see how sin has distorted our relationships. Recognizing how generous and faithful God is, we become dissatisfied with our meager, self-directed responses. We naturally want to reorder our values and make tangible changes. We do this not out of duty or obligation, but out of love for Someone greater than ourselves.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: deepening awareness and sorrow for my sins and a heartfelt experience of God's merciful love for me.

Read 2 Samuel 11:1-12:25

Prayerfully read the account of David and his sin. *What do you learn about sin and its effects in this age-old story?*

For Reflection

The Triple Colloquy

Pray the following triple colloquy, (SE 62-63) which Ignatius proposes as a way to demonstrate the sincerity of your sorrow and your desire for conversion in the way you think, feel, and act.

First, pray to Mary, the Mother of God and our Mother.

Pray that Mary ask Jesus Christ, her Son, for the following gifts on your behalf:

- For you to know deep down the rootedness of sin in your life and to truly abhor your sinful tendencies, choices, and actions

- For you to have a deeply felt understanding of how your sins have caused disorder in your life and the world around you
- For you to recognize those things in the world that get in the way of your loving and serving God as you are called
- For you to experience a deep desire to amend your life and turn away from all that is opposed to Christ

Conclude this first colloquy with a Hail Mary.

Second, offer the same petitions to Jesus Christ. Ask him to obtain the same graces for you from God the Father. Conclude with the Anima Christi. (below)

Third, offer the petitions here directly to God the Father. Conclude with an Our Father.

Anima Christi



Soul of Christ, sanctify me.
Body of Christ, save me.
Blood of Christ, inebriate me.
Water from the side of Christ, wash me.
Passion of Christ, strengthen me.
O Good Jesus, hear me.
Within your wounds hide me.
Permit me not to be separated from you.
From the wicked foe, defend me.

At the hour of my death, call me
and bid me come to you
That with your saints I may praise you
For ever and ever. Amen.

– From *Finding God in All Things: A Marquette Prayer Book* © 2009 Marquette University. Used with permission.

This prayer appears at the beginning of the Spiritual Exercises. For translations of the Spiritual Exercises, see versions by Louis J. Puhl, SJ, and George E. Ganss, SJ.

– Image: Geertgen tot Sint Jans, “*Christ as Man of Sorrows.*”

Journal

Journal your feelings, thoughts, or impressions.

Day Seven: “Who Will Rescue Me from This Body of Death?”

We end this week of reflection on sin by reading a passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans. St. Paul candidly expresses his own inner conflict, which we all can relate to. Note how he ends with thanksgiving. Your week should end in the same spirit of thanksgiving.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: growing awareness of the hidden, sinful tendencies that influence my decisions and actions; heartfelt sorrow for my sins; and sincere gratitude for God’s mercy and faithfulness to me.

Read Romans 7:14-25

Read/pray it slowly.

For Reflection

The God of My Beginning and End

Another prayer from *The Ignatian Adventure* by Kevin O’Brien, SJ. This time it is by Karl Rahner, SJ [1904-1984].

*I should like to speak with you, my God,
and yet what else can I speak of but you?
Indeed, could anything at all exist
which had not been present with you from all eternity,
which didn’t have its true home
and most intimate explanation in your mind and heart?
Isn’t everything I ever say
really a statement about you?
On the other hand,
if I try, shyly and hesitantly,
to speak to you about yourself
you will still be hearing about me.
For what could I say about you
except that you are my God,*

*The God of my beginning and end,
God of my joy and my need,
God of my life?*

– dotMagis Editor

Journal

Journal your feelings, thoughts, or impressions.