

The Negative Force of Sin in the World

If you look back on the initial notes on prayer, you will see that I gave a short description of "meditation". For this week of prayer, I would like you to try to use this form of prayer. Do not forget that sin is a mystery. It is a part of our existence on the social level (political and economic injustice, corruption, the abuse of nature, war, famine, etc.) and the personal level (what I do to others, to myself, etc.). But all of these affect each other.

All sin is disobedience to God, and a rejection of the love that He offers us. It is, then, really a break in the relationship with God, which affects our society and our own personal lives. It is much more than breaking rules. It corrupts us deep inside. Most of the time we know somehow that this sin is there, and that things are not right, but we do not reflect on the mystery of sin and the way it destroys us.

In this week, we approach this mystery of sin to become aware of the ways that we are weak and unfaithful before God. We do not look for fear and despair, but we ask for a deeper understanding of sin both in the world and in ourselves.

We ask for sorrow, tears, and disgust for the evil that creates horror in the world and which becomes part of our lives in many unnoticeable ways. Still, we pray knowing that the love of God is unconditional: The break in the relationship with God is on our part, not His; He constantly reaches out to us, even in our sin. It is we who turn away. In these meditations, I am asking you to ponder and consider this evil.

The **grace** you ask for as you begin your prayer each day is to feel the power of your sin in your human nature, to feel **sorrow** for the ways that you have sinned deliberately and carelessly, **shame** for how you have been captured by the power of sin without really knowing and **confusion** for how you have, often, not suffered for those sins.

Do not forget about the Review of Prayer and the Examination of Consciousness.

1. The Sin of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:1-19)

Here you are to reflect on the fact that we experience the power of evil within our own human nature. My freedom is a gift of God to realize my full human potential, to be fully alive and completely loving; yet, we are free to choose evil. But when we choose evil, we abuse our freedom, and we destroy the goodness of our nature that God intended for us.

Our human experience is that at some point each of us has abused our freedom and become unfaithful to the Spirit of God that was present to us. To enter this experience of our human sinfulness and the sin of our ancestors, we tell as the story of Adam and Eve. How is the sin of our ancestors worse than your own sin? Or is your sin worse? How does your sin affect future generations? Reflect on the mercy and love of God that has given you the opportunity to change and repent. Consider how you feel about all of this.

At the end, turn to Jesus whom you imagine on the cross before you. You are alone with him. He is alive, and you can speak with him, even though he is in great pain. How is it that God loves us so much that he is willing to suffer death on a cross so that we can be saved? Reflect upon yourself, and ask: What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What should I do for Christ? Speak with him as you would your closest friend (this is a colloquy -- see the notes). End with an Our Father.

2. Repetition: The Sin of Adam and Eve

On day two, I would like you to reflect again, on how the sin of our ancestors has corrupted us in some mysterious way and separated us from God so that we do what we know to be wrong, and do it freely. You may choose from the following Scriptural passages:

(a) ICor.15:21 (b) Gal.5:16-26 (c) Rom.7:13-20

Again, make your colloquy with Christ crucified. How did he come to be on the Cross? Reflect upon yourself, and ask:

What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What should I do for Christ? Talk this over with Him. End with the Our Father.

3. The Sin of One Person

Now we turn to the sin of an individual. It is true that there are forces that provoke us to do evil, and our nature has somehow been deformed by the sins of our ancestors so that we tend to do evil almost without thinking.

But we also choose evil, and it is our own responsibility. It is a choice of self-love and selfishness. The result of that is loneliness and dissatisfaction in this life; the experience of alienation from ourselves, from others, and from God. In our frustration, our sins can grow and can become more serious, because sin has a way of deforming even our judgement about ourselves.

So we may begin with what seems "natural" and insignificant, but end up doing terrible things which we no longer see as sinful. I would ask that you meditate on a long passage concerning a good man, David, who gradually, almost without noticing, turned away from God.

Pray 2 Samuel, Chapters 11 and 12. Try to notice how his sin grows. Pay attention to the parable of Nathan, which helps us to see how all of our sin is ingratitude to God, and how we create awful suffering for others. Reflect on how this nature of sin has been experienced by you in your own life.

Then make your colloquy with Jesus on the cross, letting the three questions rise within you: What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What should I do for Christ? Our Father...

4. Repetition

Return to the meditation on the sin of one person. But here I would like you to reflect on how sin affects all aspects of our life. We live in a world that has *structures* of evil. What we do is sometimes justified by saying, "everyone does it," or "that's just the way things are, I can't change those things," or "that's just part of my culture". After a while, these excuses become part of us and eventually we don't even notice that we live as though God is not important. We trust in the things of this world: riches, power, sexual relations, pleasures, etc. We fail to see how these things are temporary and can be taken from us at any time. Pray over Luke 12:13-21, and repeat the colloquy of Day 3.

5. Repetition

We repeat the meditation on individual sin. We continue to reflect on the way that structures of sin can lead us to choose things that are sinful even though they no longer appear sinful. Did the rich man of Day 4's meditation do anything that would be considered evil in our society today?

Now I present another Gospel story where again our "Christian sense" would see the sin of the situation, but our "common sense" might tell us that we cannot help certain people in our daily lives. I want you to reflect here also on the punishment that "Dives" faces: His personal sin does not just affect him by alienating him in this life. In our Christian faith we believe that our sinful actions in this life are carried with us, if we do not repent, to the life after. Traditionally, in the Middle Eastern and European cultures, it has been called "hell". Meditate on Luke 16:19-31, and repeat the colloquy of Day 3.

6. Meditation on Hell - Imagine what hell is like

Have you ever tried to imagine what hell would be like? What you might try to do is to reflect on the evils that you have experienced or seen in this world: The terrible poverty you have seen, the violence, the wars, the sexual abuse, the destruction of the environment, the abuse of power and corruption, the cheating and deception, the loneliness. Now you imagine that hell is like this, only it lacks the beauty and hope of God's creation. Imagine what hell would look like: the ugliness, the lack of light, the sounds of agony and pain. Imagine what it would be like to live forever with no hope, alone, without God, without mercy, without forgiveness, in terrible suffering. Finish your time of prayer with a colloquy like this:

Lord Jesus Christ, You have kept me from death after death, from the final loneliness. You have not let any creature send me down into the death of hell. Oh Lord, You have saved me and loved me, even when I did not remember you, or when I did not care about you. I can hardly understand or believe your love. Please let me fear nothing except that I might lose you and your love, and this loss of your love we call hell. Help me Lord, I pray!

7. **Meditation on Psalm 51.** Take some time to meditate on the beauty of this Psalm and its meaning in your own life. For your colloquy, pray as in Day 6 or however you can best express your feelings. End with the Our Father.

A Meditation on Our Sins

In this week, we continue to reflect on the mystery of sin. Whereas last week we prayed over the origins and nature of sin and our relation to it, we now move to a more sensitive area: Sin in your own personal history.

There is a danger here that I want you to be aware of and to avoid. It is good to become clear about your own sinfulness and to feel shame, confusion and remorse. But it should not lead you to despair or fear.

If you can, remember throughout your meditations that when you go into God's presence, the Lord always regards you with constant love and caring, and has done so in every moment of your life.

We are all unworthy before God, and no one "deserves" His love. He gives it freely, unconditionally and mercifully. Our experience when we reject His love, then, is sorrow, not despair; pain but not death.

A disappointed parent or spouse does not stop loving you when you have done wrong, and in some ways this makes us feel even more shame when we hurt them deliberately. The grace that you seek this week, which you should recall at the beginning of each meditation, may be expressed in this prayer:

Almighty and All-merciful God, give me the strength of spirit to name my sins and the courage to feel shame for them. Let me feel the confusion that comes with not understanding how it is that I have not completely destroyed myself and others by my sin. Teach me to weep with the tears of the heart for the hurt and harm I have inflicted upon others. Please, Lord, I really want to be aware, and to shape my life by this awareness of how this evil has become rooted in my life and in my world.

1. Meditation on my sins.

Go into God's presence and offer yourself to him. Consider how the world is filled with evil of every kind: violence, anger, self-deception, destruction. And consider how this disorder has become part of your life.

Make the prayer for the grace which is expressed by the above prayer.

First, remember your sins.

Go back to the places where you have lived and see what happened there. Recall what you have done with others -- work, friendships, projects, pleasure. When you recall any incident or action, carefully visit that memory in the presence of Jesus. What went on there? What is behind the gestures and words? What was in your heart?

Second, weigh your sins.

Look steadily at the ugliness of your sins, how revolting these actions and words were. Then look at yourself. Who are you that would do these things? Are you the best and most important person around? Should you insist on having your own way over and against God's own desires?

Third, look steadily at God.

God creates you constantly giving you good things to do, shaping you in your needs and purposes that lead to your holiness and happiness, raising good desires in you for His love and for the love of others and of yourself. He is gentle, wise and patient. God gives all gifts and even gives himself. How are you like God? How do you compare with God?

Fourth, look at all of God's creation.

Consider the beauty and order of the entire universe: animals, plants, the seas, the mountains, the stars, the sun. While you refused to be your true self, all went on as though you didn't reject its kind Creator. Creation sustained your life, even though you rejected the order of life. Why didn't all of creation reject you, as you rejected God?

Finally, turn to God, your merciful Lord, and again to Jesus on the Cross. Say whatever occurs to you, pouring out your thoughts, and giving thanks for what He has given to you up to this very moment. You are now determined not to sin again, if God will help you.

End with the Our Father.

2. Repetition

There are two parts to this repetition:

- (a) Return to yesterday's meditation, and carefully review the sin of your personal history. See if you can find in this repetition some patterns of sinfulness, whole areas of weakness, special times of failure.
- (b) With this sinful history in mind, meditate on the Scripture of John 21:15-17, keeping in mind the sinfulness, guilt and sorrow of Peter.

End with the Our Father.

3. Repetition

Again I want you to return to the sin of your personal history. This time, I want you to find not only the patterns of sinfulness, but also to "weigh" your sins: Were there sins that were more serious than others? Were there times of unfaithfulness that caused a change in the direction of your life? Were there certain sins that were more deliberate and more clearly a rejection of God's love? Meditate on Luke 18: 9-14.

End with the Our Father.

4. The Experience of my Sin and Shame

As a break from the meditation of the past few days, I would ask you to do a contemplation of Lk.7:36-50 (Reread the Suggestions for Prayer on this form of prayer). Imagine that you are the woman in the scene. What sins are there which bring you to Jesus? How do you feel in his presence?

5. Repetition

I would like you to return now to the meditation on your sins. Go through your past as you have done in the first three days of this week. Now you stand before God and all of creation

giving an account, in your imagination, of the sin of your past history. Try to make out the patterns, and focus on the "weightiest" sins. Perhaps in light of the Luke passage of yesterday, you want to do this with Jesus. Express whatever emotions the Spirit moves within you.

6. Repetition

Now I want you to try to remain quiet in this prayer over your past sinfulness. To do this, I would just like you to choose **one** of the following passages, and simply come into the presence of God, with your deep knowledge of you sin and shame, and a deep knowledge of God's mercy and love.

In other words, just spend time in quiet reflection on the Scripture you have chosen.

- (a) Eph.2:1-10
- (b) Col.1:13-14
- (c) Jam.1:13-18
- (d) 1Cor.13:1-7
- (e) Rom.7:14-25

7. Meditation on Hell

I want you now to return to the meditation of Day 6 of last week. Again, try to imagine, with all of your senses, what hell is like.

After doing this for some time, you can pray over Psalm 32 if it is helpful.

As usual, end with the Our Father.

First Week/3

**Grace: Deeper understanding of the patterns of my sin and sinfulness,
even the gift of tears**

Faced with my Sin and Sinfulness I Call on the Holy Ones

In the last week, we focused on sin in your personal history. Perhaps, through the repetitions, you recognised a time when your sin was more serious, and perhaps you began to see some patterns of sinfulness emerge. As I mentioned last week, the grace that you were to pray for in these meditations was to feel sorrow and confusion for this sinfulness.

But you were to always keep in mind that God is merciful, and to reflect on the way that His infinite and mysterious mercy has given you the opportunity to return to Him. Although we may deserve death and despair, God continues to extend His love and mercy to us. Somehow the mystery of sin and the mystery of God's mercy come together in the person of Jesus whom we see on the cross before us.

This week, I ask you to continue to reflect on the mystery of sin, and the sinfulness of your own life. This is in one way a repetition of what you have done already, but this week I ask that your repetitions lead you to a sorrow that seeks the forgiveness of God, who only wants your contrition and your true desire to do better in the future.

We cannot change ourselves completely and quickly -- it takes time. But most of all it requires the powerful help of God, God's grace. Last week I asked you to pray the "colloquy" with Jesus on the Cross. This week, I introduce the "triple colloquy", in which we seek the intercession of Mary and Jesus to obtain the graces from the Father that we need for conversion.

The Triple Colloquy

Remember that a "colloquy" is like an intimate conversation with your closest friend, a family member, or a husband or wife -- but even more intimate because God knows us better than we know ourselves, and we don't need to feel that we have to hide the most personal aspects of our lives.

When you begin to pray this week, then, come into the loving presence of God, and offer him your whole self, good things and bad. Imagine the world in which you live, and recall how your own sinfulness exists in a world that is filled with evil and destruction. Then ask God for the "grace of the week".

So, ask God for what you want: A deeper understanding of your sin and sinfulness; a feeling of shame for what you have done and left undone; a true feeling of disgust of the disorder in your life as it expresses itself in your desires and actions. Ask God to fill your heart with sadness, and perhaps even your eyes with tears, if He chooses to give you the gift of tears. You then move on to the meditation of the day that I list below, and reflect on the points that are outlined there. When you have finished the meditation, you pray the three colloquies in this way:

1) First, talk with **Mary, the Mother of Jesus.**

Imagine that you are with her alone. Imagine her in detail. We come to Mary because she is the first and most perfect disciple of Jesus, who heard the Word of God and was completely obedient and trusting. Because of her faithfulness, she was given the privileges that we all hope to enjoy some day. She is our mother and sister, one who knows our own humanity fully, and is special to her son, who is the Son of God. Ask her to pray to her son so that you might be given these favours:

i) A knowledge of your sins which reveals to you their true nature and their intentions, and a feeling of disgust for these attitudes, decisions, actions, customs, habits--recognizing especially the patterns of sin.

ii) A strong grasp of the disorder in these ways of yours -- an understanding that fills you with horror and moves you to change your life.

iii) A faith-filled knowledge of the world around you, and a sadness and contempt for its empty promises and values; so that knowing the imperfections of the world, you might desire greater and more holy ways. Pray to her the Hail Mary, slowly, and perhaps more than once.

2) Second, go with Mary and pray to **Mary's Son, Jesus**.

Ask him to ask on your behalf to the Father for these same gifts of knowledge, faith, and desire. When you have spoken with him, pray "Jesus Christ, have mercy on me" slowly and prayerfully over and over for a short time.

3) Finally, come with Mary and Jesus into the presence of **God the Father**; and ask him directly for these things. Ask that He, the Gracious, loving God and Creator of all, might give you these gifts of the Spirit. End with an Our Father.

Hopefully, you have been doing both your "Review of Prayer"; and, at the end of the day, an "Examen of Consciousness". You should continue to do these during this week. However, at times when we consider and meditate on our sinfulness, St. Ignatius also suggests a more particular Examen of Consciousness, where we focus on the sin of our personal lives. He calls this "The Examen of Conscience". Perhaps instead of the more general "Examen of Consciousness", you might do this at the end of the day. This Examen of Conscience is recommended before receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation; a pattern for this prayer is found in many prayer books.

1. On the Sin of Adam and Eve, leading into the triple colloquy

Look back to the guidelines I gave you for **First Week/1**, and reread your notes for this meditations and the repetition. This is a repetition, but you don't have to try to remember everything. You are not copying the prayer. Let your experience and insights of the past two weeks enrich your prayer, and above all try to move closer to God in your prayer.

The focus here is no longer the mystery of sin, but the mystery of sin as you come for help before Mary, her Son and his Father; in other words, the focus is the triple colloquy. I hope the guidelines above are helpful. But be imaginative, and let the Spirit take you where He wills. Do not force a conversation. Try to be simply present with Mary and Jesus and the Father. Try not to be impatient. Enjoy the love and forgiveness they offer you.

2. On the sin of one person, leading to the triple colloquy.

Review your notes on Days 3, 4, and 5 of **First Week/1**. You do not "copy" the prayer of last week. You see if there is anything new that God wishes to speak to you now in this contemplation of the compassion and mercy of Christ. Let God surprise you. Here too the focus is on the triple colloquy, as I have outlined it above.

3. On your own sins: Remember them and pray the triple colloquy.

This is a repetition of Day 1 and 2 of **First Week/2**. Return to the guidelines and notes you have for these prayer periods last week. When you meditate on your past, reflect especially on those patterns and times that stand out as important. With this self-knowledge, you go before Mary, Jesus and God the Father, who already know your sinfulness.

4. On your sins: weigh them, and pray the triple colloquy.

This is a repetition of Day 3 and 4 of **First Week/2**. Again, remember, this is a repetition which brings you to the triple colloquy. You are not just doing a review of a prayer last week. Reflect after on the triple colloquy itself:

Do you feel comfortable in this type of prayer? Are you bored? Fearful? Is it helpful? Are you becoming more relaxed in the presence of Mary, Jesus and the Father?

5. A meditation on your own death.

You might think that this is an unusual prayer, but I would like you to try it. It is something that St. Ignatius recommends to people as a regular (even monthly) type prayer, because it helps us to focus on what is really important in life, and on the mystery of our own personal death.

Most of all, though, it helps us to see how we depend on God for our life, and how much we need to be grateful for the precious gift of life. You might try it in this way (but if you can think of an alternative that is more helpful, feel free to choose your own imaginative scene). As always, go into God's presence offering your whole self, and imagine yourself as a sinner who lives in a world that suffers many evils.

Ask God for the grace that through this reflection on death, you might come to a deeper understanding of your sin, and the desire to move further away from that kind of life. Use your imagination. Imagine that you are in the hospital and you have discovered that you have a short time to live. Are things in your life in order, or are they scattered and unfinished? How old are you?

Who is caring for you and visiting you in the hospital? Ask yourself: What makes me frustrated about the death that is coming soon. Are they the things that I have left undone? Are they things that I have done? What attitudes or actions in my past create fear in me? Whom do I love? Whom do I hate? Whom have I hurt? What seems important now? What seems unimportant now, even if before it seemed to take all my attention?

After considering these things, bring your reflections to Mary, Jesus and God the Father in the triple colloquy. When you have finished, and you are thinking of doing a review of prayer, perhaps you might try something different: Maybe you are writing an article that reports your death and describes your life. What would you want it to include? What would you want to exclude? What makes your heart heavy? Do you enjoy writing this report?

6. Imaginative Contemplation: The Prodigal Son's Father (Luke 15: 11-32)

I want you for this day to take a break from your reflection on your own personal sin. In this contemplation, in which I want you to imagine that you are the prodigal son (or daughter), and God the Father is your own father.

I do not want you to dwell on your own sinfulness -- by now you should have a "general sense" of that sinfulness. Rather, I would like you to focus on the father of the story. Let the spirit move you, but ask for the grace that you might come -- even in your sinfulness -- to know the unlimited love and mercy of God, and to be truly grateful for that love.

Use the Triple Colloquy to the extent it is helpful.

7. Meditation on Hell

You have done this meditation before. Maybe look back on your notes to recall what hell was like for you and what feelings you experienced. Enter into this darkness again. If you would like to pray on a Psalm as a second part to this prayer, you may.

Or perhaps you would rather simply imagine in the second part, what it would be like to be forever separated from God the Father -- like a prodigal son or daughter who has lost all hope of ever being with his/her father ever again.

I Consider My Sinfulness Before God

Perhaps you are now growing tired of reflecting on sin, and your own personal sin. This is normal. But I want you to continue with this theme. As we grow more tired, but remain patient, God reveals new things about ourselves and about Him that are very important for our spiritual growth.

God does not let us feel the true weight of our sins until we have already experienced His forgiving and merciful love for us. In the same way, we somehow perceive this love and mercy through our meditation of the mystery of sin. Like gold that is purified by fire, our hearts are purified by the sorrow of our past failures. "Take courage, he is calling you."

You may want to review the notes that I gave to you on the triple colloquy. This form of prayer will again be important this week.

The grace that you ask for this week (which you pray for at the beginning of each prayer period) is that He will continue to reveal, in an increasingly fuller way, the mystery of sin in your life, and to give you the gift of repentance, perhaps even expressed in the tears of the heart and of the eyes.

1. A summary of the past three weeks ending with the Triple Colloquy

A "summary" is not a "repetition". Here I would like you to go through the past three weeks in general. You must prepare for this prayer period well by looking at what you have prayed on and what was important in that prayer. Single out intense experiences, moments of conviction, memorable images, clear ideas. Do not focus only on the positive, or only on the negative aspects. Do not spend too much time on any one point, but go over things more generally.

It might be like this: You have come back from a vacation or a wedding, and you sit with a very close friend that you were with on the trip or at the wedding, and you look at the picture that you both have taken. Hopefully, the most important things were taken by the camera! You go through this photo album quickly, but you sometimes pause when you are reminded of something special. Go over this prayer in that way with God; pause to reflect on what is special or important. Bring these important moments to the triple colloquy.

3. A Meditation Using Ezekiel 36:25-28

Keeping in mind what is most important from the summary of yesterday, let God speak these words to you. Even let God lovingly wash you clean of all you sinfulness.

3. Praying about your own death

This is a repetition of Day 5, **First Week/3**. You may want to look over the guidelines that I gave you for last week. You may change the circumstances of your death, but remember to focus on those things that you consider important, in a positive or negative way, in your life. Again, you may want to rewrite the report of your own death that may take the place of the review of prayer.

4. Imaginative Contemplation: Peter's Denials (Lk.22:54-62)

Can you enter into this contemplation as Peter? Only in Luke does Jesus look straight at Peter. What is this look of Jesus? I think it can only be a look of compassionate love. In the midst of his trial, Jesus thinks not of himself but of the suffering of the other. When Peter sees this love and realizes that he has failed to live up to it, then he weeps.

5. Praying on the Last Judgement

You may want to "meditate" on the following passage of your choice, reflecting and noting what strikes you; or you may want to "imaginatively contemplate" it, placing yourself in the scene in whatever way you wish. But when you are finished, consider yourself and how the passage applies to you.

Choose **one** of the following:

Matthew 25:31-46

Daniel 12:1-13

Revelation 19:1-10; and 21:1-8

6. Imaginative Contemplation: The Gerasene Demoniac (Luke 8:26-39)

Imagine yourself in the scene. Who are you? The demoniac? An apostle? The farmers? Be open to the movement of the Spirit. End with a colloquy with Jesus alone, perhaps sitting at the edge of the cliff by the sea. What do you talk about with him? How do you feel with him? What is he like?

7. Write a Prayer Summarizing What the Whole First Week Has Meant to You