



A Journey Through Lent

Reflections and Questions

Lent focuses our attention on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. During these days Jesus comes to the climax of willingly embracing the necessary suffering and inevitable death that comes from living a life of nonviolent love in an imperfect world. Jesus was able to make this journey and accept this fate because he trusted in the goodness and love of His Father. He was zealous for the accomplishment of God's will and passionate for the establishment of God's Kingdom.

We are, of course, asked by Jesus to walk this same journey, not only during Lent, but daily. Jesus asks us to die daily with him as we live a life of faith and love. We will also inevitably encounter sufferings if we are zealous for the establishment of God's Kingdom and try to live a life of love that refuses to contribute to the violence in the world.

Our experience teaches us that we can walk this Jesus-journey only if we surrender our ego expectations and desires, our selfishness and oppositional attitude, our usual style of self-defense and the many cultural patterns that form us. We need to die to all the petty thoughts and feelings and behaviors that simply clutter our life and do not provide a vacancy for God. When we are empty for God, God will fill us, and having died with Christ, we will rise with Christ.

Our daily dying allows us to cooperate with the establishment of God's Kingdom within ourselves and empowers us to contribute to God's Kingdom beyond ourselves. In particular, by our consecration, in our community life, and through our ministry we aid in the building of God's Kingdom by bearing "witness to the possibility of true brotherhood among people and nations." We know from experience that our daily dying, our contributing to building God's Kingdom, is impossible without a life imbued with the spirit of the Institute.

In Chapter 2 of the Rule of 1718, the Founder wrote a brief treatise on "The Spirit of This Institute." The first sentence of that original presentation, you may remember, is one long introductory statement about how important it is that the spirit of the Institute be acquired and increased in each member. Then our Founder identified "The Spirit of the Institute" as "first, a spirit of faith," and "secondly, . . . an ardent zeal for the instruction of children."

We immediately notice that our Founder wrote that “The Spirit of This Institute” is, “**first**, a spirit of faith,” and “**secondly**, . . .an ardent zeal.” It might seem like the Founder was naming two separate things. But our own experience of trying to live the spirit of the Institute tells us that the Founder is not naming two separate and distinct things. He intended us to live in such a way that we would not fall into that death-spiral of attempting to live faith without zeal or zeal without faith.

The Founder speaks of not distinguishing between the practices of our spiritual life and the practices of our life of ministry. He tells us that any such apparent division will dissolve if we focus on doing the will of God. Our willingness to do God’s will in a spirit of trust, will lead us to a unity of thought, feeling and action. We learn during our daily-dying journey, that trusting in God’s providence and willingly abandoning ourselves into God’s will, fulfill “The Spirit of the Institute.” Trust is our expression of faith and love of God, and willingness to live in abandonment to God’s will empowers us to express authentic zeal in the loving of others.

The unity of faith/zeal breaks apart only when we move away from trust in God’s providence, give up on ourselves in ministry and do not make God’s will top priority. Then we experience brokenness in our life – the meaninglessness, confusion and distress of “Is this really real? What is this all about? Is this all there is?” We experience the illusion that God is not embracing us in the disguised graces of the moment. But the problem is on our side. We are held by God’s providential love, as the Founder emphasized so much. The spirit of faith/zeal is the Founder’s way of inviting us to constantly experience God’s loving presence and our own empowerment. It is the Founder’s way to help us be empowered to contribute to the building of God’s Kingdom in ourselves and in the world.

Our commitment to the apostolate is an integral part of our consecration to God because authentic zeal flows from a life of faith, and equally, a life of faith is dead without the expression of zeal.

“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,’ but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” (James 2:14-17).

(a.) Ponder this text from James. What might be different throughout all of our life, not only in ministry, if you took seriously this text of James? How have you responded, both successfully and not successfully, to those you met personally who were in need, not only of material things, but of hope and a voice? The Founder and James are not using the word “faith” to suggest intellectual adherence to formulas of faith. How do you explain the dimensions of the notion of “faith”?

(b.) Recall times in your life when you experienced conflicts between the spirit of faith and zeal. What did you do to respond successfully to these apparent conflicts? In what way did you have to “die” to reach a successful resolution? How did the ways you resolved these conflicts change with your experience over you years?

(c.) Recall any failure you had in holding together in your life the spirit of faith and zeal. How did you finally resolve the situation? What did you learn about yourself in this situation?

(d.) What practical advice would you give to someone experiencing a conflict between the practices of the spiritual life and the practices of a life of ministry?

(e.) The pope has asked that parishes be “islands of mercy” this Lent. Apply that idea to ourselves, our ministries, and our communities, and reflect on how that idea might influence the way we take in and implement the Morning Prayer Reflective reading, adapted from the 2014 Rule?

In the Founder’s vision the spirit of the Institute is closely allied with the remembrance that we are in the holy presence of God. The Founder recommended also that we remind our students of God’s presence. To live with attention to God’s presence is a way the Founder attempted to help us and students to take prayer beyond books, out of the chapel, and to live prayerfully in all of life.

This is, of course, not to say that the Founder suggested that we think explicitly all the time about God (impossible and impractical). But he did recommend that we think about our life in a spirit of faith and do our duties well, without being selfishly preoccupied with success and self-satisfaction.

We might think of the practice of remembering God’s presence as a shift in the way we use our mind and the way we employ our will. This practice helps us to shift from holding on to our usual mind-set of thinking competitively, comparatively and self-centeredly; and helps us to shift from assuming our usual will-set of willfully getting our way. This shift in mind-set is from our usual pattern of self-centeredness to God-centeredness and this shift in will-set is from our usual style of willfulness (disguised tantrums, passive aggression, or bullying) to willingness (inner freedom, creativity, and compassion). Without relinquishing appropriate boundaries or giving up our willpower we begin to live more in a spirit of gratefulness for God’s providence.

To make this shift is to die daily; it is to embrace the necessary suffering of a loving person building God’s Kingdom. We find that this shift often validates itself in our freedom not “to take things personally” and in our sense of “reality,” “relief,” and “peace.”

In this regard we might remember that our Founder has indicated that in fostering our relationship with God, importance must be given to our act of attention (our deepest concern) and to our act of will (our deepest desire); and that the more important of these two (if it is possible to separate them) is not the act of intellect (pious thoughts about God), but the act of the will (willingly surrendering with gratitude into God’s providence). In this sense the spiritual journey is mindfulness and willingness.

(a.) From your experience, how do you understand the Institute practice of “remembering we are in the holy presence of God?” What has been your experience of trying to live this practice? How have you helped others experience God’s presence in your ministry?

(b.) When you have noticed your act of attention and your act of will, what have you learned about yourself? What did you contribute to any shift you may have had in your “mind-set” and “will-set”?

The Founder, influenced by the spirituality of the French School and relying on his own experience, desired to rejoice in God’s presence as did the psalmist, desiring to be transformed in God’s embrace.

You may have met those, who as young students, had experienced a teacher using the remembrance of God’s presence as a threat: “Now, I have to be out of the class for a few minutes, but don’t forget God sees you and if you do anything wrong, God will even the score.” This attempt to present God as threatening and punitive, as a kind of supernatural terrorist, seems to be a left-over from the heresy of Jansenism, which the Founder opposed. Our Founder intended that we recall God’s presence not as a threat but rather as a source of hope and healing mercy for ourselves and our students.

(a.) We can be certain that God’s presence is like Jesus’ presence – a presence of forgiveness and healing. It seems as if Jansenism has not yet completely left the Church. If you ever came across someone who imagined God as punitive and violent, how did you respond to that person?

(b.) Have you yourself felt that God is threatening and vindictive? How did you resolve those kinds of thoughts and feelings? How do you deal with the violent images of God in some portions of the bible, particularly in the psalms we pray?

(c.) Some have proposed that sometimes the Founder in his own writing seems to picture God in a threatening way. What would you respond to this?

What are some ideas that have struck you in these Reflections? How do they resonate in your own experience; how would you nuance or correct or add to them from your experience?

