Full of Grace

Women and the Abundant Life

STUDY GUIDE

Women of Grace®
Foundational Study

Johnnette Benkovic Williams

Full of Grace

WOMEN AND THE ABUNDANT LIFE

The Woman of Grace® Foundational Study Series

Edited by Mary Jo Anderson

Distributed by Living His Life Abundantly® International, Inc.

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A Word from Johnnette Benkovic

My Dear Sister in Christ,

Welcome to the Women of Grace® Foundational Study Series, *Full of Grace: Women and the Abundant Life!* You are about to embark upon a transforming journey as you explore the great call and gift of your femininity. Along the way, you will meet some of the great women saints, learn from the wisdom and guidance of Holy Mother Church, and begin to unpack the treasures of Sacred Scripture. By looking to the Blessed Virgin Mary who is our exemplar, you will find a spiritual path that leads you to the heart of the Father and the abundant life of Jesus Christ. Most importantly, you will discover your great dignity and vocation as a daughter of God and the *feminine genius* that is yours by virtue of your gender.

In addition, you will:

- Uncover the "secret" to personal fulfillment and hope.
- Deepen your appreciation and understanding of the Catholic faith, the Holy Mass and the Sacraments of Baptism, Reconciliation, and Eucharist.
- Learn what it takes to be a true friend.
- Discover the role our emotions play in our relationship with God and others.
- Recognize the strength of prayer, the power of obedience, and the light of true wisdom.
- Experience the healing power of the Holy Spirit.
- Find out why women are God's "special agents" in this new millennium.
- Be equipped to fulfill your call and mission as a woman of grace in the world today.

This is an important time for woman. Throughout his pontificate, Pope John Paul II has written extensively on the dignity, nature and role of woman in the plan of God, and has exhorted her to come to a deeper experience of her essential nature and spirit which he calls the *genius of woman* or the *feminine genius*. He has encouraged the women of the world to accept and develop the gift of their authentic femininity as the means and source through which they can experience happiness and hope, initiate and sustain cultural change, instill true and lasting peace in interpersonal relationships, and promote justice and freedom, truth and love in the world and the culture of the day. He offers them the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary as their model and guide, and tells them, "the time has come to move from words to deeds."

Indeed, woman's gifts and talents are essential for the world today. Her innate understanding of the human person, her compassion for the poor and weak, her intuitive ability to get to the heart of a situation, her patience and capacity to persevere, her generosity of heart, her inner strength and fortitude are all desperately needed in today's culture. Our hope is that by the end of this study, you have discovered all of these gifts, and so many more, within your own heart and spirit. God is looking to you to be a conduit of His love and mercy to the world today!

Please be assured of my prayers for you as you participate in this Women of Grace® Foundational Study Series. I am asking the Father to bestow upon you every spiritual blessing in the heavens (Ephesians 1:3). May God bless you and may the abundant life of Jesus Christ be yours!

Your Sister in Christ,

Johnnette S. Benkovic

JOHNNETTE S. BENKOVIC

Acknowledgments

The development of this foundational study series for *Women of Grace*® has been a labor of love, patience, and effort on the part of many people. Its broad appeal is largely due to the "voice" it has been given by all of the special ladies whose contributions comprise it: Mary Jo Anderson, Ronda Chervin, Genevieve Kineke, Rosalind Moss, Dale O'Leary, and Heidi Saxton. Thank you for sharing in the process and helping to make this study series a reality.

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Finally, thank you to my husband, Anthony, for your patience while this project was being developed and brought to completion. As always, your love, understanding, and tremendous support are the backbone of my efforts.

JOHNNETTE S. BENKOVIC

Meet the Contributors

MARY JO ANDERSON — Editor-Chief – Catholic journalist and commentator. Mary Jo Anderson publishes in a wide variety of publications and is a contributing editor to *Crisis Magazine*. She brings a Catholic perspective to the global issues of our day and time and their impact on women in the world today. Mary Jo serves on the Advisory Board for Women of Grace® and is a frequent guest on *The Abundant Life Television Program* (EWTN) and *Moments of Truth Live* (Catholic radio). Mary Jo is a popular conference speaker. She is a mother and grandmother and has been married to her husband, Frank, since 1966.

JOHNNETTE BENKOVIC — Founder and president of Women of Grace®, and founder and president of Living His Life Abundantly®. Johnnette has been active in the field of Catholic communications since 1987. She is host of *The Abundant Life Television Program* (EWTN) and *Moments of Truth Live* (Catholic radio). Author of five books, including *Full of Grace: Women and the Abundant Life*, Johnnette is a popular conference speaker and retreat facilitator. She is a mother and a grandmother and has been married to her husband, Anthony, since 1973.

RONDA CHERVIN — Professor and writer. Ronda received her doctorate in philosophy from Fordham University and a masters in religious studies from Notre Dame Apostolic Institute. Ronda is a convert to Catholicism from Judaism. A prolific writer, Ronda is the author of some 50 books to date including *Feminine, Free and Faithful*, *Treasury of Women Saints*, *Prayers of the Women Mystics*, *Living In Love: About Christian Ethics*, and *A Mother's Treasury of Prayer*. She is an international speaker, a widow, a mother and a grandmother.

GENEVIEVE KINEKE — Founder of *Canticle Magazine* (formerly called Hearth) in 1992, Advisory Board Member of Women of Grace®, conference presenter and host of *Women in the Church Today*, a television and radio program. In 2003, Genevieve gave *Canticle* to Women of Grace® continuing on as author of *Fanning the Flame*, a regularly featured column. She has been married to her husband, Charley, since 1984 and is the mother of five children.

ROSALIND MOSS — Apologist, conference presenter, television host. Born and raised in a Jewish home, Rosalind came to Catholicism by way of Evangelical Protestantism. She entered the Catholic Church at Easter 1995 after a long and arduous search for the Church Jesus founded. Rosalind is a staff apologist at Catholic Answers, and serves on the Advisory Board of Women of Grace®. She is a well-known conference speaker and co-hosts the television series, *Household of Faith* (EWTN).

DALE O'LEARY — Freelance writer and international advocate for women. Dale attended the Cairo Conference on Population and Development in Egypt in 1994, and the Beijing Conference on Women in China in 1995, both sponsored by the United Nations. There, she upheld the Catholic understanding of woman and worked diligently against the anti-life/anti-family agenda. Her experiences led her to write her book, *The Gender Agenda: Redefining Equality*. A frequent write for *Canticle Magazine*, Dale has been married to her husband, Terry, since 1963 and is mother to four children and grandmother to ten.

HEIDI SAXTON — Editor — Heidi Hess Saxton converted to the Catholic Church in 1994 and is a graduate student of theology at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit. She is a freelance journalist and author of the books *With Mary in Prayer: Meditations and Guidance from the Life of Mary*, *Let Nothing Trouble You: 60 Reflections from the Writings of Teresa of Avila*, and *Touched by Kindness: True Stories of People Blessed by Compassion*. She and her husband, Craig, are in the process of adopting their two foster children.

Introduction

The Women of Grace® Foundational Study Series is part of the Women of Grace® ministry to women. Women of Grace® is an outreach of Living His Life Abundantly® International, Inc. In his Letter to Women, Pope John Paul II writes, "...I am convinced that the secret of making speedy progress in achieving full respect for women and their identity...must first and foremost be won through an effective and intelligent campaign for the promotion of women, concentrating on all areas of woman's life and beginning with a universal recognition of the dignity of woman.

It is to this end that Women of Grace® has been founded. Its mission is to affirm women in their dignity and vocation as daughters of God and in their gift of authentic femininity by exploring all aspects of the feminine person including her spirituality, psychology, emotional reality, and physical being. Through an effective and intelligent campaign, Women of Grace® promotes the dignity of woman, the grace of true womanhood, and woman's fundamental call and mission in the world.

Women of Grace® conferences, retreats, study series, study groups, interactive website (www.womenofgrace.com), radio program, and *Canticle Magazine: The Voice of Women of Grace* comprise the multi-faceted strategy implemented to achieve its mission. A membership opportunity also exists for those women who are seeking a closer affiliation with each other and with the apostolate. Women participants are encouraged to become part of a "grassroots" *Women of Grace®* effort in their own parishes, communities, and geographic regions.

Women of Grace® does not seek to supplant the good work already being accomplished by other existing apostolates, but rather to supplement their efforts by providing them with materials and resources to aid them in accomplishing their own vision and mission. Therefore, *Women of Grace®* works to cooperate with the many faithful Catholic apostolates (particularly those for women) already organized throughout the United States and beyond.

HOW THIS STUDY SERIES WORKS

The primary objective of the Women of Grace® Foundational Study Series is to explore with you an authentic understanding of the gift of your femininity, and to help equip you to bring the grace of your gender to bear upon your interior being, your relationship with God, your interpersonal relationships, and the culture of the day. The feminine person will be studied in conjunction with Church teaching and Sacred Scripture specific to the dignity and value of womanhood. The Blessed Virgin Mary is our exemplar and model. Her strength, courage, and maternal love is our inspiration and hope.

MATERIALS:

In addition to this study guide, you will need three other items:

Full of Grace: Women and the Abundant Life by Johnnette S. Benkovic
Catechism of the Catholic Church
Holy Bible
(The study series quotes from Revised Standard Version, Catholic edition, but you may use any translation.)

Note: If purchasing the above items is a hardship, both the Holy Bible and the Catechism of the Catholic Church are available on line. Most libraries are now equipped with computers that can be used free of charge.

For the Catechism and the Holy Bible go to:
www.womenofgrace.com/study

All materials are available for purchase by going to:
www.womenofgrace.com
Or calling:
800-558-5452

Or writing to:
Women of Grace®
c/o Living His Life Abundantly® International, Inc.
325 Scarlet Blvd,
Oldsmar, FL 34677

THE STUDY GROUP:

The Women of Grace® Foundational Study Series uses a multi-media approach. Each week you will gather together with your study group to discuss the five lessons you have completed at home, view the weekly videotape lesson presented by Johnnette Benkovic, complete the Media Response Sheet while you view it, and discuss the answers you have recorded with your group.

In the group discussions, courtesy and affirming listening is the key. This means implementing some basic rules of etiquette (paying attention, not interrupting or talking out of turn, limiting your responses so everyone has a chance to share, not taking "center stage," etc.) and being totally present to the person speaking. The group meeting is not a time of problem-solving, nor emotional or spiritual counseling. It is also not a gripe session. Rather, it is a time to discover how the Holy Spirit is mightily present in each woman's life. The members of the group must be receptive listeners who seek to "hear" the action of the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of their sister members.

An open and respectful attitude must be maintained toward all of the women in your group. In addition, each woman's privacy and confidentiality must be respected. Gossip or "tale-carrying" finds no home in the *Women of Grace®* setting. The study group provides an opportunity for every woman to grow in the virtues of patience, cheerfulness, humility, and charity.

THE "AT HOME" LESSONS:

Each week you will complete five lessons at home. You will notice that each week of study has a special theme and corresponding grace to pray for. Before beginning each lesson, review the theme and the grace and ask God to help you mine the rich treasure of each. Every lesson includes an opening and closing prayer, questions for you to answer from the book, *Full of Grace: Women and the Abundant Life*, a section entitled *Know the Faith*, a Catholic "vocabulary word," *For Pondering* which features a contribution by another writer, and a "word of wisdom" leading to a closing prayer. In addition, each week you will read about two great women saints whose lives inspire us and instruct us in authentic femininity.

Many of the questions following each section are meant to encourage you to "dig deeply." St. Teresa of Avila once said there is no spiritual growth without self-knowledge. Do not be afraid to "go to the depths." Jesus is waiting for you there. Except for the questions that are directly related to the text, Sacred Scripture, or the teachings of the Church, there are no "right" or "wrong" answers. This is YOUR study – approach it as such. In some cases, the space

provided for you in your study guide not be sufficient for your response. For this reason, you may consider keeping a separate journal for your responses.

WHAT IS EXPECTED OF YOU:

You have invested in this study series by purchasing the study guide and the text. In addition, you may have purchased a copy of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and a bible. The very fact that you have sensed a desire to participate is an indication of the Holy Spirit's movement in you. Therefore:

- Plan on attending every meeting and completing the "At Home' Lessons. While there is no question that duties, responsibilities, or unexpected circumstances can interfere with your commitment, it is important to discern between them and a tendency to look for an excuse to "opt out."
- If you must miss a study group meeting, contact your facilitator ahead of time if at all possible. In this way, the group will know to proceed without you. Also, arrange a time with your facilitator to find out when you can view the videotape presentation you will be missing, go over the lessons you have completed, and review any announcements or discussion points your group will have made in the meeting.
- It is an act of courtesy and charity to be prompt. Unavoidable situations can sometimes delay us. Again, make sure the delay is prompted by circumstances rather than procrastination. God cannot be outdone in generosity – give Him some time and He will give you more than you ever expected!

BECOME A MEMBER:

Many women have enjoyed a closer affiliation with each other and the *Women of Grace®* apostolate through membership. While all of the outreaches of *Women of Grace®* are available to everyone, there are some special benefits that apply to members. They are:

- 20% discount on all *Women of Grace®* products and merchandise
- Access to the "Members Only" section on the *Women of Grace®* website
- Special conference discounts
- VIP pre-conference reception to meet the speakers
- Discount on an annual subscription to *Canticle Magazine: The Voice of Women of Grace*
- Gracemail, the bi-monthly members newsletter
- Monthly Mass celebrated especially for the intentions of *Women of Grace®* members
- Free gift and membership card

Use the "Become a Member Form" in the Resource Section of your study guide, speak to your facilitator about becoming a member, join on-line at www.womenofgrace.com, or call 800-5578-5452.

BECOME A FACILITATOR:

Is God asking you to share the *Women of Grace®* study group experience with other women by becoming a facilitator? If so, go to www.womenofgrace.com or call 800-558-5452 to find out how.

Chapter One

The Special Call and Gift of Woman

Full of Grace: This week covers pages 9-26 of the text.

Our first week together is filled with a holy mystery: How a woman, in the midst of "ordinary" duties, is invited to live out an extraordinary vocation that is uniquely her own, by virtue of her womanhood. She possesses feminine gifts that are vital to the modern world. Yet, too many of us worry that we can do nothing to make a difference, "What can I do? I am just one person!"

The answer is in the pages that follow, especially in the example of great women of the Bible and women saints throughout the history of the Church. Through them you will discover what you have "known but forgotten": that God has a particular plan for your life. There is not a day to waste. Each of us is needed at this critical moment in human history. If we respond in obedience to God's call, just imagine what God can do with us!

This first week we will consider the special call and mission of women, created to bring the life of Christ to the world. We do this, as Mary did, by remaining receptive to the Spirit, trusting and submissive to the perfect will of God as revealed through Jesus Christ. As we do this, we will bring the life and love of Christ to a world that is desperately seeking for truth. Let us consider, then, how we are to accomplish this important task:

LESSON ONE — Called by God
LESSON TWO — The Time for Woman is Now
LESSON THREE — Women's Influence and Vocation
LESSON FOUR — Impregnated with the Spirit of the Gospel
LESSON FIVE — Called to Radiate the Life of Christ

Questions To Ponder This Week

- Throughout Church history "ordinary" women have lived extraordinary lives, filled with the Holy Spirit. Why were women such as St. Paula, Blessed Gianna, and St. Catherine of Genoa so influential, each in her own way?
- Who are the women who have made a difference in my life? How? Whose life has been (or will be) influenced by mine? Why? How?
- The Blessed Virgin's "*Fiat*" ("Let it be done unto me…") sets an example for us all: How have I responded to the grace of God? Give a specific example, complete with time and place.

Media Response Sheet

The Special Call and Gift of Woman

Answer the following questions as you watch the pre-recorded lesson given by Johnnette S. Benkovic, founder of Women of Grace®.

WEEKLY THEME:
God has created me for a special and unique purpose according to my feminine vocation.

WEEKLY GRACE:
I pray for the grace to recognize my call and mission and its relationship to my femininity.

1. What will we experience during the course of this study if we are faithful to our prayer time, do the lessons in the curriculum, and participate in the group meetings?

   _____

   _____

2. What passage from Sacred Scripture tells us who we are, why we are, and what our purpose and mission is in life? _____

3. Who are we? _____

   Why are we? _____

   What is our purpose and mission? _____

4. What are the three attributes of God and what do they mean?

   _____ means _____

   _____ means _____

   _____ means _____

   What do they tell us about our selection by God to be women? _____

   _____

5. Why did God create us to be women?

   a. _____

   b. _____

6. What special gift of woman is specifically feminine? _____

7. Everything about the feminine person signifies the reality that it is to woman that…. _____

8. Our femininity is as inherent to our _____ as it is to our _____.

9. All women, regardless of their state in life or physical capacity to bear life, are called to be _____

_____.

10. Who perfectly lived out this feminine vocation as mother, and where do we see this in Sacred Scripture?

11. What are the three marks of a spiritual mother?

    a. _____

    b. _____

    c. _____

12. What is our call and mission as women at this moment in the history of man? Why is it so important?

Woman of Grace

St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein, 1891 – 1942)

She was a brilliant scholar, a contemplative mystic, and a "liberated" feminist. At various times she was also a devout Jew, an atheist, a philosopher, a Catholic, and a Carmelite nun. Hers was a heart that hungered for truth, with a passion that burned with such purity and clarity that Pope John Paul II, whose own writings bear the unmistakable imprint of her spirit, canonized her less than fifty years after her death at Auschwitz.

Edith Stein was born to a devout Jewish family in Breslaw (now Wroclaw, Poland) on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. She lost her father when she was only two years old. Sustained by her faith, Edith's mother worked hard to support her eleven children. And yet, by the time she was a teenager, Edith no longer practiced her childhood faith. She considered herself an atheist.

Despite this, her search for truth continued. She was introduced to Christianity at university through her study of philosophy, which encouraged her to be open to "transcendent realities," as well as the example of friends who had converted to the faith. There were other signs as well: One day Edith observed a woman laden with packages, who entered the church and paused for a few moments' prayer. Edith was struck by the casual familiarity of that anonymous soul, who had stopped by for an "intimate chat" with God, a few moments of simple communion. She never saw the woman again, but her wordless example spoke volumes to Edith's hungry heart.

Years later, Edith came upon the autobiography of Teresa of Avila, and read it in a single afternoon. So profoundly was she affected by it, Edith determined then and there to become both a Catholic and a Carmelite. (Although she did convert almost immediately, she did not take the habit of Carmel for another decade.)

After her conversion to the faith, Edith continued to write and lecture, and was a powerful voice in the Catholic Women's Movement in Germany from 1927 to 1933, until it was no longer safe for her to continue her work. Edith's visibility made her a prime target as Hitler rose in power and the pressure against the Jewish community mounted. She was offered a position in South America, but chose instead to enter the Carmel of Cologne just before her forty-second birthday. She spent five years there; her sister Rosa, who converted shortly after their mother's death in 1936, followed Edith to the monastery where she worked as a third-order Carmelite.

By 1938 the convent walls could no longer protect the sisters, who were sent to Holland. Then the Netherlands fell under Hitler's power. Plans were made to send Edith and Rosa to Switzerland, but it was too late. Not long after the Dutch bishops wrote an encyclical denouncing the atrocities inflicted by the Nazis, all Roman Catholic Jews in Holland were rounded up for execution. Edith and Rosa were among those captured and sent to Auschwitz.

Camp survivors remembered Edith's calm serenity, and her concern for the needs of everyone but herself. Even in her last days on earth, Edith was a living witness to the power of the cross. As the Holocaust raged all around her, she saw the cross that had been placed upon on the shoulders of the Jewish people. "Most of them will not understand it," she wrote. "But those who do understand must accept it willingly in the name of all. I wanted to do that.... But in what the bearing of the cross was to consist I did not yet know."

A week after arriving at the camp, Edith and Rosa were both sent to the gas chambers. Edith was just fifty years old.

Though Edith did not survive the war, her writings continue to bear rich fruit. Her influence is clearly seen in the writings of Pope John Paul II, who beatified St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross in 1987, particularly in his Letter to Women and his encyclical *Mulieribus Dignitatem*.

Indeed, the role and nature of woman was the subject of Edith's most remarkable and original work. Unlike radical feminists of her time (and ours), Edith recognized the real, fundamental differences between the sexes. She believed that these differences are not arbitrary, but are imprinted upon us, body and soul. She insisted that these differences are not hierarchical or diminishing; rather, she perceived the complementarity of the sexes as a necessary good.

Edith believed that women are by nature companions and mothers, and yet she believed that women are capable of working in any profession. Whether at home, in the workplace or professional environment, women have the power to transform society in ways that men cannot. And all is accomplished through the power of love, and the power of the cross.

Woman of Grace

St. Madeline Sophie Barat (1779-1865)

Many great women saints lived out their call to evangelize by instructing children in the faith. Such is the case with St. Madeleine Sophie Barat. Born in Burgundy, France, Madeleine Sophie was raised in a Catholic home. When she was ten years old, her brother Louis, a seminarian, discerned that she was destined to do great things for the kingdom of God. He took it upon himself to educate her in the academic disciplines as well as sacred matters, and to spiritually form her according to the virtues. Madeleine Sophie's education came to a temporary halt when Louis, then ordained, was arrested and imprisoned for two years during the French Revolution. Upon his release, he called Madeleine Sophie to Paris, where he resumed her education.

When the Revolution ended in 1799, the Church in France greatly needed reconstruction, especially its schools. Though Madeleine Sophie wanted to become a Carmelite, under the guidance and direction of her brother Louis and a Father Varin she founded what became the Society of the Sacred Heart, a religious order dedicated to prayer, sacrifice, and the education of girls. With three other companions, Madeleine Sophie made her first consecration in 1800, and professed her vows on June 7, 1802.

As superior of the congregation, Mother Barat quickly established schools throughout Europe and England, and initiated plans to start schools in North America. She journeyed from one convent to another, wrote thousands of letters, counseled cardinals and bishops, and even began retreat work for laywomen.

By the end of her life, Mother Barat had founded 105 schools in all. She was progressive in her educational ideals, and arranged for a general council meeting of her sisters every six years to stay updated on curricula and methods. A champion of women, Mother Barat worked to provide a course of studies that helped her pupils attain the fullness of the feminine ideal. Reflecting on Proverbs 31:10-31, she wrote:

> *How rare it is to find a valiant woman! It is perhaps necessarily so, since Scripture says that they are more precious than pearls and diamonds. Let us however work to train a few. For in this century we must no longer count on men to preserve the faith. The grain of faith that will be saved will hide itself among women. A woman cannot remain neutral in the world. She too is set for the fall and resurrection of many. How different are God's thoughts from ours!*
>
> *Between women and God is often arranged the eternal salvation of husbands and sons. But for this she must be valiant. Strong to uphold purity of life. Strong to keep inviolate the treasure of faith. Strong in every battle of life. Great-souled in the face of calamity, persecution and death. And remember, sorrow is the training ground of strong souls.*
>
> ST. MADELINE SOPHIE BARAT

FAITH IN ACTION

In what ways does St. Madeline Sophie Barat's quote apply to women in our day and time? Ask yourself: In what specific way(s) can I seek to become more like the "valiant" woman she describes?

Lesson One

Called by God

Prayer to the Holy Spirit
O Holy Spirit, Soul of my soul I adore Thee.
Enlighten, guide, strengthen and console me.
Tell me what I ought to do, then command me to do it.
I promise to be submissive in all that Thou asks of me,
and to accept all that Thou permittest to happen to me,
only show me what is Thy will. Amen.

WEEKLY THEME:
God has created me for a special and unique purpose according to my feminine vocation.

WEEKLY GRACE:
I pray for the grace to recognize my call and mission and its relationship to my femininity.

Full of Grace: Read pages 9 –12 in the text, then answer the following questions.

1. In the Jewish culture, a person's name tells us something important about the essence and character of that person. When the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, he calls her "full of grace." What does this tell us about the state of her soul?

2. If I were to respond to God's invitation to carry Christ "in the womb of my heart," to whom might I be called to bear Him and how, given my state in life?

3. At this point in my life, what obstacles or fears keep me from saying, "yes" to God?

KNOW THE FAITH

God Selects Mary

The Catholic Church teaches that from all eternity God selected Mary to be the mother of the Savior, and enriched Mary with all of the gifts necessary for such a call and mission. One of these gifts was her Immaculate Conception, which means she was preserved from the stain of original sin. This is explained more fully in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 490 to 493. Read this passage, then answer the following questions.

1. What is Mary's "Immaculate Conception"? Why was it an important gift for the one called by God to be the mother of the Savior?

2. How and when was Mary redeemed?

WORD TO KNOW

Dogma – **a binding teaching of the Church, which the faithful are compelled to believe. A dogma is revealed by divine revelation either explicitly or implicitly. Explicit revelation is found in the Scriptures; implicit revelation refers to the ongoing Tradition of the Church, starting from the earliest times and continuing in the teaching office of the Magisterium to the present day.**

FOR PONDERING...

Mary, My Mother

I came from Judaism into the fullness of the Catholic faith, by way of Evangelical Protestantism. Though I had studied the Scriptures for eighteen years as a Protestant, I had little knowledge of the Woman whom God gave to the world, the Woman first spoken of in Genesis 3:15, through whom our Savior came to crush the seed of the serpent and purchase our salvation on Calvary's Cross.

It was difficult for me to understand the Catholic Church's emphasis and teachings on Mary. How could she have been "conceived without sin" when the Bible says that *all* have sinned and come short of the glory of God?" Why do

Catholics hold her in such high esteem? Why do they consider her their mother, too, and the model for our life in Christ?

Then one day I came across the passage in the first chapter of Luke where the angel Gabriel came to the young Jewish virgin whose name was Mary. The angel delivered to her the most awesome, fearful message ever given a human being: She would bear the very Son of God!

"How could this be?" Mary asked the angel.

Gabriel answered, "*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.*"

As a Jew, Mary understood the meaning of Gabriel's words. And because of my Jewish roots, I did, too. My thoughts turned immediately to the Holy of Holies within the Temple. It contained the Ark of the Covenant, which housed the two tablets of stone that Moses had brought down to the Israelites from Mount Sinai. Two cherubim of gold sat on top of the Ark and, when God came to dwell among men through His presence, His Shekinah, His glory, descended upon that Ark. No one – not Moses, not even the High Priest of Israel – could enter that holy place or he would be struck dead (see Exodus 40, especially verses 34-35).

In the first chapter of Luke, the angelic messenger uses the same word for God's indwelling presence to describe what was going to happen to Mary: "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.*" That glorious cloud of God's presence that hovered over the Ark of the Covenant would hover over Mary when she conceived the Son of God!

Now it was my turn to ask the question, "How can this be?" If Moses and the High Priest of Israel would have been struck dead to be so near the presence of God, why wasn't Mary immediately struck dead when the Holy Spirit caused her to conceive? There is only one possible explanation: She must have been sinless, spotless, *full of grace*, just as the angel called her, and just as the Catholic Church has always taught. God intentionally preserved her—kept her free—from the stain of original sin so that she, Mary, could be the Mother of God.

Mary's overshadowing told me more as well. In the Old Testament, the Ark of the Covenant had been God's dwelling place on earth and the sign of His presence with His people. By conceiving the Son of God, Jesus Christ, Mary became God's dwelling place on earth and the sign of His presence with His people, thus fulfilling the prophesy of Isaiah: "*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel*" *(7:14).*

In other words, Mary is the Ark of the *New* Covenant. As the mother of our Lord and Savior, Mary is also the mother of His Church and of His people. This makes her my mother, and yours as well. How could there be a safer, purer, more blessed path to Christ than to remain near Mary His mother, the Woman Full of Grace, whom God gave us to lead us to her Son?

R.M.

What truth about the Blessed Mother presented here do I find most inspiring and why?

_____

_____

_____

"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Be it be to me according to Thy word."

BLESSED VIRGIN MARY, LUKE 1:38

Lord, give me the grace and courage to embrace my call and mission as a daughter of God, just as Mary did. Amen.

Lesson Two

The Time for Woman Is Now

Prayer from the Revelations of Saint Brigid
"Blessed art Thou, my Lord, my God, and most beloved Lover of my soul!"

WEEKLY THEME:
God has created me for a special and unique purpose according to my feminine vocation.

WEEKLY GRACE:
I pray for the grace to recognize my call and mission and its relationship to my femininity.

Full of Grace: Read pages 12 - 14 in the text, then answer the following questions.

1. Put into your own words the closing message of the Second Vatican Council Fathers to women. What do these words tell you about your call and mission as a woman in the 21st century?

2. In what ways does the analogy of seed, water, and soil shed light on the receptivity of a woman to new life?

3. What interior reaction do you have to the idea of being gentle and receptive? Does this dimension of your femininity come naturally to you? Why or why not?

4. What "rough exteriors" and "crusty coats" do you think God might want to penetrate in your own life?

KNOW THE FAITH

Mary: Our Mother in the Order of Grace

An encyclical is a letter written by the pope to the universal Church concerning matters of doctrine, morals or discipline, or about significant commemorations. An encyclical calls Catholics to give interior as well as exterior assent and obedience to the teachings it provides.

Redemptoris Mater ("Mother of the Redeemer") is an encyclical written by Pope John Paul II in 1987. In it, the Holy Father gives us clear teaching about Mary's place in God's plan for salvation. Look for the answers to these questions as you read from Paragraph 39 of the Holy Father's encyclical:

1. What two understandings are expressed in Mary's words, "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord"?

   a. _____

   b. _____

2. With what did Mary's motherhood become "ever more imbued" and what did this quality seek to achieve?

3. Based on this excerpt, what does the phrase "mother in the order of grace" mean?

4. Develop your own definition for "spiritual mother" based on this excerpt from *Redemptoris Mater.*

The words "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord" express the fact that from the outset [Mary] accepted and understood her own motherhood as a total gift of self, *a gift of her person to the service of the saving plans of the Most High. And to the very end she lived her entire maternal sharing in the life of Jesus Christ, her Son, in a way that matched her vocation to virginity. …This basic fact of being the Mother of the Son of God is from the very beginning a complete openness to the person of Christ, to his whole work, to his whole mission. The words "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord" testify to Mary's openness of spirit: she perfectly unites in herself the love proper to virginity and the love characteristic of motherhood, which are joined and as it were fused together.*

For this reason Mary became not only the "nursing mother" of the Son of Man but also the "associate of unique nobility" of the Messiah and Redeemer. As I have already said, she advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and in this pilgrimage to the foot of the Cross there was simultaneously accomplished her maternal cooperation with the Savior's whole mission through her actions and sufferings. Along the path of this collaboration with the work of her Son, the Redeemer, Mary's motherhood itself underwent a singular transformation, becoming ever more imbued with "burning charity" towards all those to whom Christ's mission was directed. Through this "burning charity," which sought to achieve, in union with Christ, the restoration of "supernatural life to souls," Mary entered, in a way all her own, into the one mediation "between God and men" which is the mediation of the man Christ Jesus. …In response to this interior willingness of his Mother, Jesus Christ prepared her *ever more completely to become for all people their "mother in the order of grace"* (MR 39).

WORD TO KNOW

Original Sin – the hereditary stain with which we are born on account of our origin or descent from Adam. The consequences of this stain, even when we are washed clean in baptism, include a disordered will, darkened intellect, and concupiscence of the flesh.

FOR PONDERING…

Midwives

God wants all of us as women to respond with an unqualified "Yes!" to His call. Some of us may feel frightened by the idea that God expects us to change the world—even that little part of the world around us. We look at our own resources and ask, "How can God expect me to solve other people's problems when I can't solve my own?"

If we think that we can rely upon our own limited resources to solve serious problems, we are in real trouble. God is the one who solves the problem – He alone has the answers. Even so, He wants our help. He calls us to be midwives, to assist in the birth of faith in other souls.

Think about the vocation of midwife. A midwife has nothing to do with the conception of the child. She may notice the growth of the child in the womb and encourage the mother, but her real work involves helping the mother through the birth process.

Gail was the midwife of my faith, while I was seeking out the fullness of the faith before joining the Church. The seed had been planted years before, but when I talked to Gail she explained her faith in such a simple way. Her words helped me through the birth process.

As midwives of faith, we are called to help our friends through the process of conversion. As God's grace settles deep in another person's heart, a desire to know God begins to grow. If a soul isn't open to faith, as midwives we can pray that God will work in that person's life until she has a change of heart toward Him. Until that time, there is little we can do.

Once God has planted the seed of faith in the open soul, however, slowly the desire grows and we, the midwives, may notice that our friend or coworker is pregnant with faith. She starts asking questions. She responds more positively when you talk about your faith. And then the day will come – in God's good time – for the faith that was growing in her to manifest itself.

This conversion process is different for everyone. Some struggle, some fight, and some have easy deliveries. We, the midwives, merely guide the natural process. We give encouragement to the soul in labor, soothing, comforting, guiding the process. And when faith bursts forth, we provide care during the first moments. The child is not ours but God's. He is ultimately responsible for the soul's continued growth, just as He was for its conception.

D.O'L.

Who are three "midwives" in my life and what have they "brought to birth" in me? Have I been a "midwife" for someone in his/her faith? Who and how?

IN CLOSING...

"O Jesus, I promise to submit myself to all that You permit to befall me, make me only know Your Will. My most sweet Jesus, infinitely merciful God, most tender Father of souls, and in a particular way of the most weak, most miserable, most infirm which You carry with special tenderness between Your divine arms, I come to You to ask You, through the love and merits of Your Sacred Heart, the grace to comprehend and to do always Your holy Will, the grace to confide in You, the grace to rest securely through time and eternity in Your loving divine arms."

ST. GIANNA BERETTA MOLLA

Lord, help me with feminine intuition to recognize when I am being called to assist in the birth of new life, especially spiritual life. Amen.

Lesson Three

Woman's Influence and Vocation

Prayer: Hail Holy Queen

Hail Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, our life, our sweetness, and our hope.
To you do we cry, poor banished children of Eve.
To you do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.
Turn then, O most gracious advocate, your eyes of mercy toward us;
and after this, our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of your womb, Jesus!
O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary!
Pray for us O holy Mother of God,
that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.
Amen

WEEKLY THEME:
God has created me for a special and unique purpose according to my feminine vocation.

WEEKLY GRACE:
I pray for the grace to recognize my call and mission and its relationship to my femininity.

Full of Grace: Read pages 14 –19 in the text, then answer the following questions.

1. What spiritual reality is mirrored in a woman's physical potentiality to bring forth new life?

2. Why and how are consecrated religious women and celibate single women still called to motherhood?

3. What does the Greek word *munus* mean? What is woman's *munus* and what about her helps her to carry it out?

4. In what specific ways am I living out this *munus*? How can I grow in this call?

KNOW THE FAITH

The Hour Is Now

The last general meeting of the Second Vatican Council was held on December 7, 1965. On December 8, 1965, Pope Paul VI and various cardinals addressed different groups of people. The closing message, *To Women*, was read by Leon Cardinal Duval of Algiers, Algeria, assisted by Julius Cardinal Doepfner of Munich, Germany, and Raul Cardinal Silva of Santiago, Chile. This letter is prescient in its content and as timely now as when it was first delivered. Once you have read the excerpt below, answer the questions that follow.

1. What characteristic will help woman aid humanity in not falling?

2. According to the letter, what are some of the ways women influence the world in a way unique from men?

3. Which of the "womanly virtues" mentioned in this letter do I most need to acquire?

And now it is to you that we address ourselves, women of all states – girls, wives, mothers and widows, to you also, consecrated virgins and women living alone – you constitute half of the immense human family. As you know, the Church is proud to have glorified and liberated woman, and in the course of the centuries, in diversity of characters, to have brought into relief her basic equality with man. But the hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of woman is being achieved in its fullness, the hour in which woman acquires in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is under-going so deep a transformation, women impregnated with the spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling.

You women have always had as your lot the protection of the home, the love of beginnings and an understanding of cradles. You are present in the mystery of a life beginning. You offer consolation in the departure of death. Our technology runs the risk of becoming inhuman. Reconcile men with life and above all, we beseech you, watch carefully over the future of our race. Hold back the hand of man who, in a moment of folly, might attempt to destroy human civilization.

Wives, mothers of families, the first educators of the human race in the intimacy of the family circle, pass on to your sons and your daughters the traditions of your fathers at the same time that you prepare them for an unsearchable future. Always remember that by her children a mother belongs to that future which perhaps she will not see.

And you, women living alone, realize what you can accomplish through your dedicated vocation. Society is appealing to you on all sides. Not even families can live without the help of those who have no families. Especially you, consecrated virgins, in a world where egoism and the search for pleasure would become law, be the guardians of purity, unselfishness and piety. Jesus who has given to conjugal love all its plenitudes, has also exalted the renouncement of human love when this is for the sake of divine love and for the service of all.

Lastly, women in trial, who stand upright at the foot of the cross like Mary, you who so often in history have given to men the strength to battle unto the very end and to give witness to the point of martyrdom, aid them now still once more to retain courage in their great undertakings, while at the same time maintaining patience and an esteem for humble beginnings.

Women, you do know how to make truth sweet, tender and accessible, make it your task to bring the spirit of this council into institutions, schools, homes and daily life. Women of the entire universe, whether Christian or non-believing, you to whom life is entrusted at this grave moment in history, it is for you to save the peace of the world.

WORD TO KNOW

Vocation – from the Latin verb "vocare," meaning "to call." A call by God to an individual in which a path or state of life is revealed which will bring that soul to God in the most efficacious way.

FOR PONDERING...

The Influence of Mothers

Developmental psychologists who study little babies have come to some remarkable conclusions. At one time people believed that babies' minds were blank slates. Now there is evidence that from the moment the baby is born, she is pre-programmed to attach to her mother. The baby has heard Mama's voice in the womb, and is born to look for her mother's smiling face and the spark of light in her eyes. And mothers have a natural instinct to lean close to their baby and smile. This bonding between mother and child—whether or not they are biologically related—is absolutely crucial to the development of that infant.

Through this interaction between mother and child, connections are built in the baby's brain, connections that form the foundation for the child's emotional development. A baby who is securely attached, whose mother has smiled an cooed during the first months will – for the rest of her life – have an image of love imprinted on her brain and thus go through life feeling secure.

Unfortunately, sometimes it happens that a baby doesn't securely attach. The mother may sincerely love her baby, but just not be able to give that baby what she needs in the critical firsts. Perhaps the mother is ill or unavoidably absent, depressed or angry. Or maybe she was so little nurtured herself that her "mothering" instincts are not what they should be. When this happens, the child grows up with an empty place inside where the picture of her mother's loving smile is supposed to be.

That's why God needs spiritual mothers—women who can "mother" unmothered children. Our positive influence on others begins when we have a heart for their well-being. Whenever possible, we must try to reconcile these unmothered souls with their natural mothers; when that is impossible, we must bring them to Mary, who is the perfect mother of us all.

Do you have a friend who has revealed to you an empty place in her heart? Remind yourself that she probably doesn't need more "good advice." She knows that her life is in disorder. What she needs is someone who will look in her eyes and say with tenderness, "God really loves you and so do I."

D. O'L.

What women has God placed in my path to mother me besides my own mother? Is the Blessed Mother an active "mother" in my life? Who might God be asking me to "mother" besides my own children?

IN CLOSING...

"By union with God we shall gain hearts. . . . Without this union we will but make a little noise."

ST. JULIE BILLIART

Lord Jesus, show me your heart for the people you put in my life as spiritual sons and daughters.
Mary, pray for me, that I might radiate your motherly love.

Lesson Four

Impregnated with the Spirit of the Gospel

Prayer
Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle;
be our protection against the wickedness and the s
nares of the devil.
May God rebuke him, we humbly pray,
and do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Host,
by the power of God thrust into hell Satan and all the evil spirits
who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen.

WEEKLY THEME:
God has created me for a special and unique purpose according to my feminine vocation.

WEEKLY GRACE:
I pray for the grace to recognize my call and mission and its relationship to my femininity.

Full of Grace: Read pages 19 –21 in the text, then answer the following questions.

1. What does it mean to become "impregnated?"

2. Using Cardinal Ratzinger's comparison of Mary's motherhood to a field, describe how we can become impregnated with a spirit of the gospel.

3. What is Mary's *munus* and how does she carry it out?

4. Have I surrendered myself completely to God so that I might radiate "that divine energy that initiates others into God's own life?" If not, what prevents me from doing so (consider fears, concerns, misconceptions, attachments, sins, etc.)?

KNOW THE FAITH

Carrying The Word of God to the World

The Church exists to evangelize. It is her primary call and mission. As members of the Body of Christ, we, too, are called to evangelize. Like Mary, we are called to carry the Word of God to the world. The Second Vatican Council's "Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*) gives us good guidance and instruction on "restoring the temporal order." Read the paragraphs from this document that are printed below, then answer the following questions.

1. Paragraph six says that one of the ways we evangelize is with the witness of our lives. What are the two opportunities we have to announce Christ by our words?

   a. _____

   b. _____

2. What "new problems" in our own time call for increased efforts in evangelization?

3. On what does the success of the lay apostolate depend?

4. Why is the Blessed Virgin Mary the perfect example of evangelization?

(AA 6) The mission of the Church looks to the salvation of men, which is to be achieved by belief in Christ and by His grace. The apostolate therefore of the Church and of all its members is primarily directed to manifest Christ's message by words and deeds and to communicate His grace to the world…

There are innumerable opportunities open to the laity for the exercise of the apostolate of evangelization and sanctification. The very testimony of their Christian life and good works done in a supernatural spirit have the power to draw men to the faith and to God…

However, an apostolate of this kind consists not only in the witness of one's life; a true apostle looks for opportunities to announce Christ by words addressed either to non-believers with a view to leading them to faith, or to the faithful with a view to instructing, strengthening, and encouraging them to a more fervent life…

Since, in our own times, new problems are arising and very serious errors are circulating which tend to undermine completely religion, the moral order, and human society itself, this holy Council earnestly exhorts laymen – each according to his natural endowments and training – to be more diligent in doing their part to explain, defend, and properly apply Christian principles to the problems of our era in accordance with the mind of the Church.

(AA 4) …it is evident that the success of the lay apostolate depends upon the laity's living union with Christ, according to the Lord's words, "He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit, for without me you can do nothing: (John 15:5) … In this way the laity must make progress in holiness in a happy and ready spirit, trying prudently and patiently to overcome difficulties… Such a life requires a continual exercise of faith, hope, and charity.

The perfect example of this type of spiritual and apostolic life is the most Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Apostles, who while leading a life common to all here on earth, one filled with family concerns and labors, was always intimately united with her Son and in an entirely unique way cooperated in the work of the Savior. Having now been assumed into heaven, with her maternal love she cares for the brothers of her Son who are still on their earthly pilgrimage and remain involved in dangers and difficulties until they are led into the happy fatherland. All should most devoutly venerate her and commend their life and apostolate to her maternal care.

WORD TO KNOW

Apostolate: Refers to the mission of the Church to carry on the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, to be expressed in ways appropriate to each vocation. There is the Apostolate of the Hierarchy, the Apostolate of Priests, the Apostolate of Religious, and the Apostolate of the Lay Faithful.

The Apostolate of the Lay Faithful is exercised by the laity in the ordinary duties of daily life – within the family, the workforce, the social and political spheres, and the professions. By virtue of our baptism, each of us has been called to contribute to the sanctification of the world.

FOR PONDERING...

Women Who Changed History

In the Old Testament, women such as Miriam, Deborah, and Judith were leaders among their people, and changed the course of history by their actions. In the New Testament, Our Lady's "Yes" to the angel Gabriel ushered in the New Covenant. Through her apparitions at Guadalupe, Mary has evangelized millions of people in Mexico and Central and South America.

A great many other holy women have influenced the course of Church history as well. Saints Catherine of Siena, Joan of Arc, Brigid of Sweden, Teresa of Avila, Katharine Drexel, and Venerable Conchita are just a few outstanding examples of women who were active forces of change in the world. However, those hidden in cloisters or devoted primarily to their own families have through their prayerful witness had untold influence as well. Saints Therese of Liseux and Gianna Beretta Molla are just two such examples.

God has filled women from every walk of life with graces for transforming the world. Whether consecrated religious, single women, or wives and mothers, each of these women understood the importance of their gifts for the time and age into which they were born. Woman is a transmitter of life not only through the babies she carries in her womb, but also in her spiritual motherhood.

Because of the "reach " of media today, the influence of women may be read, heard, or seen even more clearly. Women transmit Christian life whenever they influence culture and society. Two of the greatest "mothers" of the 20th century—Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and Mother Angelica, foundress of EWTN—have no biological children. And yet, their ministries reached millions of people; they are "Mother" not only because of their affiliation within a religious community, but out of the gratitude of their spiritual children, the beneficiaries of their motherly love.

As Saint Edith Stein understood it, precisely because a woman's body is able to house another human being, women are created body and soul for person-to-person intimacy. Our motherly hearts have empathy for those who suffer, making us eager to find ways to help those in need whether by picking up the destitute and dying off the street, bringing the truth through television and radio to those in doubt, or soothing a child in pain.

Ask God to show you how He wants you to answer the call to motherhood today.

R.C.

What unique circumstances in my life set me apart and provide me with a path of holiness that only I can pursue?

IN CLOSING...

"I love you and pray for all of you as if you were my own, and you are. To young kids, I'm a grandmother, to others a mother, to most of you a nun, and to all of you a friend. God loves you."

MOTHER ANGELICA

Lord Jesus, from the cross you gave your Mother to every soul you died to save.
Help me to see in every soul Your Mother's beloved child. Amen.

Lesson Five

Called to Radiate the Love of Christ

Prayer: The Memorare

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known
that anyone who fled to your protection,
implored your help, or sought your intercession, was left unaided.
Inspired with this confidence, I fly to you,
O Virgin of virgins, my Mother!
To you I come; before you I stand, sinful and sorrowful.
O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions,
But, in your mercy, hear and answer me. Amen

WEEKLY THEME:
God has created me for a special and unique purpose according to my feminine vocation.

WEEKLY GRACE:
I pray for the grace to recognize my call and mission and its relationship to my femininity.

Full of Grace: Read pages 21 –25 in the text, and then answer the following questions.

1. Truly happy women have an inner glow that transcends daily anxieties. They shine from within, reflecting the light of their heavenly Father. Who are some women I know who radiate these virtues of the Blessed Virgin: self-offering love, strength in sorrow, fidelity and devotion in work, intuition, support, and encouragement?

2. Which of these "radiant" qualities describe me? (Hint: Which of these qualities have others noticed in you? Which do you tend to notice most quickly in others?)

3. St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) said that Jesus stands in the center of Mary's life. To what extent would she say that about me? Upon what would she base her answer?

4. What are the three dispositions of heart that mark a handmaid of the Lord?

KNOW THE FAITH

Mary Shows Us Who We Are To Be

Lumen Gentium is the document from the Second Vatican Council that concerns the Church. In it we find the Council's teaching about the Blessed Virgin Mary. In Paragraphs 63 to 65, Mary is called a "type" of the Church. In its biblical sense, a "type" is a person, thing, action or event that is a foreshadowing of the future. A "type" also means the individual who realizes the ideal. Mary fulfills both of these definitions as a type of the Church. Read for yourself this section of the Council document, then answer the following questions.

1. In what three ways does the Church reflect Mary?

   a.

   b.

   c.

2. How is Mary the "pattern of virtue" of the faithful?

> *In the mystery of the Church, which is itself rightly called mother and virgin, the Blessed Virgin Mary played a leading role, providing an example as virgin and mother in an eminent and unique way. In faith and obedience she brought forth on earth the very Son of the Father: She who knew not man was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. As a new Eve she believed, not the serpent of old but the messenger of God, with a faith wholly free from doubt. She gave birth to the Son, appointed by God to be* the firstborn among many brothers, *that is, among those who believe; with a mother's love she cooperates in their birth and development.*
>
> *The Church contemplates the depth of her holiness, imitates her charity and in fidelity brings to completion the Father's will; she herself becomes a mother through the word of God received in faith.*

Through preaching and by baptism she brings forth to new and everlasting life children conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of God. She is herself a virgin, preserving with integrity and purity the faith she has reposed in her Spouse. She imitates the mother of her Lord, and by the power of the Holy Spirit treasures with virginal purity faith in all its fullness, hope in all its certainty, love in all its sincerity.

In the person of the Blessed Virgin the Church already possesses the perfection by which it stands without spot or wrinkle; *but the faithful still strive to grow in holiness as they conquer sin. So they lift their eyes to Mary, shining above the whole community of God's elect as the pattern of virtue. As the Church lovingly reflects on her and contemplates her in the light of the Word made man, it reverently enters more deeply into the surpassing mystery of the incarnation and takes on more and more the likeness of its Spouse.*

Mary, because she has entered intimately into the history of salvation, in a certain sense gathers up in her own person the great truths of the faith and awakens their resonance when she is the object of preaching and veneration; she summons the faithful to her Son, to his sacrifice and to the Father's love. In seeking to further the glory of Christ, the Church becomes more and more like Mary, its exalted type, as it continues its progress in faith, hope, and charity, seeking and fulfilling the divine will in all things.

So also in its apostolic task the Church rightly looks to the one who bore Christ, Christ who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin in order that he might also be born and grow in the hearts of the faithful. In her whole life this virgin mother showed herself as an example of that motherly love that must animate all who share in the apostolic mission of the Church for the regeneration of mankind.

WORD TO KNOW

Shine: A number of Greek words are translated "shine." Three of these are *phaino* ("The light *shines* in the darkness and the darkness comprehended it not," John 1:5), *lampo* ("Let your light *shine* [like a torch] among men," Matthew 5:16), and *eklampo* ("Then the righteous shall *shine forth* as the sun in the kingdom of the father," Matthew 13:43).

FOR PONDERING...

Radiant From Within

Quite a number of Catholic women have difficulty identifying with the mother of Jesus. The statues in our churches depict Mary perfectly still and quiet, leading us to imagine her as an apparition rather than a flesh-and-blood woman in Nazareth. Surely in her motherly warmth, Mary our mother felt tender concern for all in need in her town as well as for the disciples of her Son. Surely those people were recipients of Our Lady's intuition, comfort, helpful advice, and deeds.

Many of us have some of the womanly gifts described in this lesson (for example fidelity, encouragement, and intuition). Often, though, we are so focused on our shortcomings that we don't thank God for the good we do by radiating authentic love for others. When others praise our virtues, we think, "That was nothing; it was easy for me." And yet, it is easy precisely *because* it is a gift from God.

Edith Stein is quoted in *Full of Grace* (page 24), saying that our deepest longing is to surrender ourselves totally to God. In moments of grace, we do give ourselves to Him in this way. But then, later on, we forget and surrender to our idols instead: We try to please others at the expense of God's will; allow our desire for earthly treasure to keep us from being generous to the poor; desperately cling to disordered relationships.

However, if we allow it, God can heal us of the insecurities that lead to attachments to lesser goods. Through a deeper and more honest prayer life, however, we may begin to draw closer to God Himself, the greatest good of all.

Begin by setting aside a designated time of prayer each day. Some spiritual advisors recommend making your personal prayer time a daily appointment with God. It is good to use the beautiful words of traditional prayers, but it is also necessary to pray from our negative feelings. An example might be, "Dear loving God, I am bedeviled with anxieties about losing worldly things or relationships. Help me to fall in love with *You* so that I can seek your gifts with less desperation."

R.C.

Is there anything in my life that might be considered an "idol"? What strategy or strategies can I employ to put it in its proper place?

IN CLOSING...

"We should not wish for anything but what comes to us from moment to moment, exercising ourselves nonetheless for good."

ST. CATHERINE OF GENOA

Father God, You knit me together in my mother's womb, and knew me long before my eyes opened on this world. Help me to trust Your benevolent goodness. Amen.

Chapter Two

Prayer: Strength of the Abundant Life

Full of Grace: This week covers pages 27-45 of the text.

There are as many definitions of prayer as there are persons who pray. Essentially, prayer is how we approach God, and how we cultivate a strong personal relationship with Him. As with all relationships, there are some general principles we must follow protect our spiritual health and to avoid confusion. And yet, within those boundaries we can anticipate a uniquely intimate exchange with the Divine.

Prayer is the key to strong spiritual health. Many women saints left us prayers that leap off the page for joy, expressing sheer delight in the company of their Lord. Other saints recorded their struggles, and how they persevered when their souls felt "dry" and far from God. Some pour out their anguish in times of trial. Here, too, are the ordinary daily expressions of ordinary women—like ourselves! In these pages we pray that you'll find inspiration for your own prayer life.

In this chapter we will learn different methods for prayer. Some of these methods or modes of prayer may be familiar, but untried; others will be altogether new to you, a revelation about how to pray. As you work though these pages, be generous with your time. Allow yourself to become immersed in the idea of deep prayer. Ask God to give you a desire to spend more time in dialogue with Him. For true intimacy with God, we cannot subsist on quick prayers sandwiched between dental appointments and carpool pick-ups.

Ironically, women who have learned to pray deeply often discover that time seems to "stretch" in other areas of life. No time spent in prayer is ever wasted. Our prayers invite Jesus to continue His work in us, to bring to completion the purpose for which He created us.

As you cultivate a consistent prayer life, expect your life to change significantly. As you turn your thoughts again and again toward God, *you* will experience true transformation and renewal. When this happens, you will find yourself able to serve God in ways you never thought possible, and to do wonders in the world around you.

This week we will look at what the Church teaches about five aspects of prayer, and how you can begin to put these prayer forms into practice in your own life.

LESSON ONE Prayer Power
LESSON TWO Vocal Prayer
LESSON THREE Meditation
LESSON FOUR Contemplation
LESSON FIVE The Effects of Prayer

Questions to Ponder This Week

- In what areas of my life would I most like God to transform me?
- How does prayer initiate that process of transformation?
- How does each mode of prayer fulfill a distinct purpose in God's plan for my life?
- How does Christian prayer unify the Body of Christ?

Media Response Sheet

Prayer, Strength of the Abundant Life

Answer the following questions as you watch the pre-recorded lesson given by Johnnette S. Benkovic, founder of Women of Grace®.

WEEKLY THEME

Supported by consistent prayer, my daily life will be transformed.

WEEKLY GRACE

I pray for the grace to have a regular, established time of prayer each day.

1. _____ and _____ seem to go hand in hand. And, when we make a decision for the Lord, _____ seem to increase. Why is this so?

2. Our call is always to be _____ to those around us, and to awaken the _____ _____ in them. Who is our exemplar? _____

3. What are three ways we can cooperate with the will of the Father?

   What is the first step to growing in these three ways, and why?

4. What is prayer? What definition do you find in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church?* How does St. Teresa of Avila define prayer?_____

_____

5. What are the two kinds of vocal prayer?

   a. _____

   b. _____

6. What is the key to praying formulated prayers?

_____

_____

7. Spontaneous vocal prayer yields to…

_____

_____

8. Mental prayer is essentially _____ speaking to _____ What is meditation?

9. What are the four faculties of distinctively Christian meditation according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church:*

   a. _____

   b. _____

   c. _____

   d. _____

10. Fill in the acronym to see how we enter into Sacred Scripture:

   P: _____

   R: _____

   A: _____

   Y: _____

11. How do we know when our prayer is becoming contemplation?

_____

_____

12. Encounters with God are_____.

Woman of Grace

St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

St. Teresa of Avila is one saint who shows us it is never too late to get serious about our prayer life. Born Dona Teresa Sanchez Cepeda Davila y Ahumada, Teresa was an active child with a big imagination and great sensitivity of heart. Raised in a pious family, little Teresa was intrigued by the lives of the saints and the martyrs. She and her brother, Roderigo, often sought to imitate their holy example.

When Teresa was fourteen, her mother died. This proved to be a turning point in the young woman's life; a young cousin came to keep Teresa company, and the cousin's worldly ways greatly influenced the young saint. One of their pastimes was reading tales of chivalry and romance, of which Teresa later wrote, *"These tales did not fail to cool my good desires, and were the cause of my falling insensibly into other defects."*

Teresa's father, Don Alonzo, was not blind to the change in his daughter; he decided to send her to an Augustinian convent, to be educated among other girls of her social class. A serious illness interrupted Teresa's education, however, and she was brought home to recuperate.

After her recovery she spent time at the home of a pious uncle, who gave her the *Letters of St. Jerome* to read. These letters sparked a desire in her heart for religious life but her father withheld his consent. Fearing that if she waited she would lose her resolve, Teresa sneaked away and secretly entered the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation outside the city of Avila. One year later, after making her profession, she was once again struck by a serious sickness. Don Alonzo removed her from the convent and, after a period of intense illness, she began to regain her health.

This time, her devout uncle gave Teresa a book by Father Francis de Osuna, which introduced Teresa to the prayer of recollection and the prayer of quiet. This book led her in the practice of mental prayer, from which she soon progressed to more advanced stages of contemplation.

After three years, Teresa went back to the convent. However, sixteenth-century convent life was not very conducive to prayer. Young nuns were permitted to receive guests in the convent parlor, and Teresa soon found her time filled with visitors and idle conversation. Using the excuse of her health to salve her conscience, she soon gave up the practice of mental prayer altogether, a decision she later regretted. In her autobiography she says, *"This excuse of bodily weakness was not a sufficient reason why I should abandon so good a thing, which required no physical strength, but only love and habit. In the midst of sickness the best prayer may be offered, and it is a mistake to think it can only be offered in solitude."*

By the time Teresa finally returned to the practice of mental prayer she was thirty-nine years old and had been a nun for twenty years. She was never to abandon her life of prayer again. As her interior life progressed, Teresa was given extraordinary visions and locutions; these brought her closer to God and yet convicted her of her shortcomings. In time, she translated her insights into a classic spiritual work called *The Interior Castle*, a book comparable in its theological weight and significance to St. Augustine's *Confessions*.

Eventually, Teresa moved out of the Carmel of the Incarnation, and established the Discalced (shoeless) Carmelite order, which kept a more primitive (ascetic) rule of life. Despite great difficulties and persecution, she founded sixteen other houses throughout Spain, and died at one of these houses at the age of 67. Because of her enormous theological contribution to the Church especially in the realm of prayer, she was declared a Doctor of the Church.

> *"An intelligent mind is simple and teachable; it sees its faults and allows itself to be guided. A mind that is dull and narrow never sees its faults even when shown to them. It is always pleased with itself and never learns to do right."*
>
> ST. TERESA OF AVILA

FAITH IN ACTION

Like St. Teresa, we often become ensnared by distractions and circumstances that tempt us to forsake our commitment to pray. What excuses do you most commonly use? Ask yourself, "How can I increase my resolve?"

Woman of Grace

St. Gertrude the Great (1256 – 1301?)

The nuns of the Benedictine Abbey at Helfta in Saxony would have been surprised to hear that Gertrude, their bright and engaging pupil, would one day be called "the great" because of the depth of her prayer life rather than for her academic achievements. The community did not consider Gertrude to be particularly zealous or pious. And, indeed, for her first twenty-five years she was not.

Shortly after her twenty-fifth birthday, Gertrude had an encounter with the risen Lord, who promised to free her from the emotional depression and spiritual distress she had been battling. "Do not fear," He told her. "I will save you and set you free." From that moment on, Gertrude was favored with visions and a level of mystical prayer that transformed her life. She gave up her academic studies and began to pursue the interior life and the study of Sacred Scripture. At the request of Our Lord, she began to record the insights and spiritual understandings she received. Many of these writings have been lost; however, some of them, such as *The Herald of Divine Love*, have been preserved.

The foundation of Gertrude's spiritual life was the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In the Sacred Heart she experienced the humanity of Jesus and the infinite depth of His love for us. She saw His most Sacred Heart as a treasury of graces ready to be dispensed upon the sinner at the least movement of repentance. Jesus gave St. Gertrude visions of His Sacred Heart. In these visions, St. John the Beloved Disciple was often present. During one of these visions, St. Gertrude asked St. John, "Why is it, O beloved of God, that you who rested on His bosom at the Last Supper have said nothing of what you experienced then?"

St. John answered her, "It was my task to present to the first age of the Church the doctrine of the Word made flesh, which no human intellect can ever fully comprehend. The eloquence of that sweet beating of His Heart is reserved for the last age in order that the world grown cold and torpid may be set on fire with the love of God."

St. Gertrude had a particular burden for the souls in purgatory. This burden was placed upon her heart by other visions the Lord gave her. In one such vision, Gertrude saw a table upon which were placed many expensive pearls. She was given to understand that the pearls represented the prayers for the holy souls. All at the same time, St. Gertrude saw souls being freed from suffering and ascending like bright sparks to heaven.

In another vision, Our Lord told Gertrude that He longed for someone to ask Him to release souls from purgatory to heaven. And in still another vision, the Lord told the saint that He would release a thousand souls from purgatory every time the following prayer was prayed:

> *Eternal Father, I offer Thee the Most Precious Blood of Thy Divine Son, Jesus, in union with the Masses said throughout the world today, for all the Holy Souls in purgatory, for sinners everywhere, for sinners in the universal church, those in my own home and within my family. Amen.*

These visions of Jesus continued until the end of Gertrude's life. In her last moments, Jesus said to her, "Come, my chosen one, and I will place you on My throne." In 1677 Pope Clement XII proclaimed that St. Gertrude's feast be observed throughout the Church. One biography of the saint says that she may well be the leading woman writer and visionary of thirteenth century monastic culture. Clearly, though she lived more than six hundred years ago, St. Gertrude gives example and insight for all women of the third millennium.

FAITH IN ACTION

Consider St. John's statement to Gertrude about the Sacred Heart. What about our day and time might indicate that this may well be the time to "hear" the "eloquence of the sweet beating" of the Sacred Heart of Jesus? What about this time in my own life?

Lesson One

Prayer Power

Prayer: The Magnificat (Luke 1:49-50)
"The mighty God has done great things for me, and
Holy is His name.
His mercy reaches from age to age."

WEEKLY THEME
Supported by consistent prayer, my daily life will be transformed.

WEEKLY GRACE
I pray for the grace to have a regular, established time of prayer each day.

Full of Grace: Read pages 27–31 in the text, then answer the following questions.

1. Daughters naturally seek a special relationship with their fathers. As daughters of God, we have a perfect Father, worthy of our trust. Can you think of a time when you were especially aware of God's love and care?

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. God's _____ is the means He has provided for us to come to Him. We come to the _____ through _____.

3. How does the intimacy of a relationship with another human person compare to the kind of intimacy God wants to have with us? In what ways are they similar?

   _____

   _____

   _____

4. What are the three main categories of prayer?

   a. _____

   b. _____

   c. _____

KNOW THE FAITH

The Rosary: A Way to Contemplation

The Rosary is an ancient prayer form that incorporates all three categories of prayer. Its name is derived from the word *rosarius*, meaning a garland or bouquet of roses. This popular devotion has been practiced in the Church for more than a thousand years.

Initially, monks strung pebbles or bone fragments on a rope and used it to count their prayers. By the thirteenth century, they were manufactured by an honored craft guild, and were widely called "Paternosters," the Latin name for the "Our Father," which at the time was the predominant prayer of this devotion. The Hail Mary as we know it was not used until the twelfth century; it was gradually added until the Rosary grew into its present form.

Until recently, fifteen Christian mysteries were associated with the Rosary: five joyful, five sorrowful, and five glorious. Each of these mysteries was reflected upon for the time it took to pray ten Hail Mary's, represented by ten beads (called a "decade"), followed by a single Our Father. The Rosary is "Christocentric," for each mystery is intimately connected to the life and work of Jesus. On October 16, 2002, Pope John Paul II signed an apostolic letter called *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* ("The Rosary of the Virgin Mary"). In it he suggested that the faithful consider adding five additional mysteries to the prayer of the Rosary. These "Luminous Mysteries" or "Mysteries of Light" focused on the public ministry of Jesus.

Implicit in the Holy Father's etter is the fact that the Rosary incorporates all three forms of prayer – vocal prayer, meditation, and contemplation. The "repetition" of the Rosary is designed to help the one who prays to assimilate the mysteries of Christ's life through meditation. Consequently, the prayer of the Rosary "engages the whole person in all his complex psychological, physical, and relational reality, a characteristic common to Christian spirituality" (No. 27).

The Holy Father also suggested that the very design of the Rosary takes on "a symbolism which can give added depth to contemplation" (No. 36). The circular set of beads fashioned around the Crucifix indicates that the life and prayer of the believer is to be centered on Christ: "Everything begins from him, everything leads towards him, everything through him, in the Holy Spirit attains to the Father."

According to the Holy Father, the beads provide a "counting mechanism" that mark the progress of the prayer evoking the "unending path of contemplation and of Christian perfection," while the "sweet chain" that links the beads binds us to God as Father and puts us in tune with Mary and Christ himself. The beads also "remind us of our many relationships, of the bond of communion and fraternity which unites us all in Christ."

The prayers of the Rosary themselves continue to aid our union with God. Although the Hail Mary is "the most substantial element in the Rosary and also the one that makes it a Marian prayer *par excellence*" (No. 33), the Holy Father points out that this prayer is also profoundly Christological, for it gives us a "glimpse of God's own wonderment as he contemplates his 'masterpiece' – the Incarnation of the Son in the womb of the Virgin Mary."

In his letter, the Holy Father draws our attention to the central position of *the name of Jesus* in the prayer, and refers to it as the *hinge* that joins together the two parts of the Hail Mary. It is the prayer's *center of gravity*, establishing the relationship between Mary and Christ, that gives us the confidence to entrust ourselves to her maternal intercession.

Pope John Paul II closes his beautiful letter by exhorting families to once again make the Rosary a part of their family prayer. He encourages all parents to entrust to the Rosary the growth and development of their children. "To pray the Rosary *for children*, and even more, *with children*, training them from their earliest years to experience this daily 'pause for prayer' with the family, is admittedly not the solution to every problem, but it is a spiritual aid which should not be underestimated." Prayed with consistency, faithfulness, and devotion, those who make the Rosary part of their prayer life can expect to learn "the secret of peace and make it his life's project."

1. Briefly explain how the Rosary incorporates all three categories of prayer.

2. Which of the Holy Father's insights about the Rosary will help me pray this prayer with greater devotion? Why?

WORD TO KNOW

Devotion: A prayer or other external practice of piety that reveals a desire to be at the service of God. True devotion may focus directly upon God in worship and adoration, or indirectly through the veneration of the Blessed Mother or the saints, the "first fruits" of God's salvific work. When practiced with sincerity of heart, devotions promote an ardent and active life of faith. Popular devotions include the Rosary, the Stations of the Cross, honoring First Fridays and First Saturdays, enthroning pictures of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary in the home, and many other acts of piety.

FOR PONDERING...

Praying With Love and Devotion

I'll never forget the Christmas Eve that I visited a Catholic church for the first time. My brother, David, was actually thinking of becoming Catholic – of all things! – and I desperately wanted to stop him. Thanks be to God, I could not stop him. But I'll never forget walking into that little church in upstate New York and sitting through what I would later learn is the greatest prayer of the Church – the Mass.

I was shocked to discover that the prayers sounded much like those I prayed as a child with my family: "Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation," the priest prayed at the beginning of the liturgy of the Eucharist. "Through your goodness we have this bread to sanctify, which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life." Every Friday night we used to pray these words in my Jewish home as we gathered around the Sabbath table: "Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheynu, Melech ha Olam hamotzi lechem min ha aretz." ("Blessed art thou O Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.")

Seventeen years passed before I, too, entered the Catholic Church and received from that altar the true Bread of Life, the Jewish Messiah. However, long before this happened I learned that all of our Catholic prayers are rooted in the Old Testament Scriptures. Every prayer of our Blessed Mother, of Simeon, of Zechariah, and of our Lord Himself is rooted in the Old Testament Psalms and Prophets. Our Lady drew her Magnificat -- her hymn of praise and thanksgiving – from the Psalms as well as the prayer of Hannah in the first book of Samuel. Like the souls of the

apostles, Mary's soul had been steeped in the Jewish Scriptures; consequently, their knowledge of and love for God was reflected in their prayers.

I knew that our prayers, like those of our faithful ancestors, should also reflect our knowledge and love of God. Our Father in Heaven desires that we know Him. He desires that our hearts become filled with love of Him, He Who is the God of Israel, the God who became Man for us, and who died and rose that we might have life.

How can we enter into that love and knowledge more deeply? Three key actions can help us grow in this way:

First, unite your heart with God and come to Him as a child with a child's heart. Do not fear. He loves you and gave Himself for you.

Second, begin your day with prayer. I awake every morning and thank God that I am Catholic and that He has given me knees to bend. If you haven't begun your day in prayer, start by getting out of bed, come before God on your knees and say, "Good morning, Lord. Thank you for giving me this day. Please help me to love you today in everyone I see – in my husband, my children, my co-workers, that difficult neighbor. Help me to love them as you love me. Amen."

Third, pray as a family. Don't let your children leave the house in the morning without praying together – even one Hail Mary. Pray the Rosary with your children. Some Christians teach against the Rosary, thinking that our Lord is against repetition, but He is not. Jesus and His followers prayed the psalms, which are filled with repetition in praise of God. Psalm 136, for example, repeats in every other line, "His mercies are new every morning." Jesus condemned vain repetition. Meditating on the life of our Lord in the Rosary is not a vain endeavor.

Four, pray with humility and faith. This most beautiful quote from a Jewish sage sums it up well:

> *"It is proper for you to know, my brother, that the aim of our devotion in prayer consists in naught save the soul's longing for God, humbling itself before Him, and extolling the Creator with praise and gratitude unto His name, and casting all burdens upon Him" (Bahia ibn Pakkudah, Duties of the Heart, iii).*

R.M.

What "key" can I implement to improve immediately the quality of my prayer life?

IN CLOSING...

"There is no queen like humility to make the King surrender. Humility drew the King from heaven to the womb of the Virgin, and with it, by one hair, we will draw Him to our souls."

ST. TERESA OF AVILA

Lord, You know how often my pride keeps me from running after you. Forgive me, Lord, and give me grace to kneel close to Your heart.

Lesson Two

Vocal Prayer

Prayer: An Act of Love
O My God, I love Thee above all things,
with my whole heart and soul,
because Thou art all-good and worthy of all love.
I love my neighbor as myself for the love of Thee.
I forgive all who have injured me, and ask pardon
of all whom I have injured. Amen.

WEEKLY THEME

Supported by consistent prayer, my daily life will be transformed.

WEEKLY GRACE

I pray for the grace to have a regular, established time of prayer each day.

Full of Grace: Read pages 31 - 33 in the text, and then answer the following questions.

1. What are the two categories of vocal prayer? Describe each. What attitude of heart should we bring to vocal prayer?

2. How can we evaluate the quality of our vocal prayer?

3. What is *mental prayer?* What does it signify about the interior life?

4. List three practical strategies you can use to be more fervent in vocal prayer:

   a. _____

   b. _____

   c. _____

KNOW THE FAITH

Vocal Prayer: An Expression of Love

In the section on prayer, The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that "prayer is the life of the new heart" and that it should "animate us at every moment" (No. 2697). Therefore, vocal prayer is meant to be much more than the mere recitation of words; it is meant to be an expression of our love for the God who has done great things for us.

Vocal prayer, like meditation and contemplation, requires an inner disposition that weds together the deepest part of our being to the words we speak. St. John Chrysostom reminds us of the necessity of praying from the heart. He says, "Whether or not our prayer is heard depends not on the number of words, but on the fervor of our souls." May our vocal prayer be a reflection of the interior fire of our soul ignited with love of God.

Read paragraphs 2701 to 2704 in the *Catechism*, which instruct us on how to increase the fervor of our vocal prayer. Then answer the questions below.

1. How did Jesus use vocal prayer?

2. Why must we use our senses in prayer? How does it satisfy a divine requirement, and how is it an initial form of contemplative prayer?

WORD TO KNOW

Litany: In her Encyclopedia of Catholic Devotions and Practices, Ann Ball describes a litany as "a prayer in the form of responsive petition. In Old Testament times, the Jews had a form of public prayer in which one or more persons would pronounce an invocation and those present would answer by repeating a certain prayer. The early Church retained this practice, calling these alternating prayers a litany, from the Greek litaneia, meaning 'a humble fervent appeal.' In the Latin Church, a typical structure developed gradually." The five litanies sanctioned for public use are: The Litany of Loretto (or Litany of the Blessed Virgin), The Litany of the Saints, The Litany of the Holy Name, The Litany of the Sacred Heart, and The Litany of St. Joseph.

FOR PONDERING...

Praying Loud and Clear

Some Catholic women love formulated vocal prayers. The familiar words allow us to lift our minds and hearts above petty daily concerns or obsessive worries to enter into the beautiful world of God's kingdom. Other women have unpleasant associations with this kind of prayer, and recall being forced to pray with family when they would rather have been doing almost anything else. For these women, learning that God is equally pleased with spontaneous personal words from the heart is liberating.

Praying in your own words, for even five minutes a day, is good for the soul. Just tell the Lord what is uppermost on your mind and heart. This kind of regular prayer can be surprisingly effective in helping us to break through into a different mansion of Our Father's kingdom, as Teresa of Avila taught her spiritual daughters.

As you pray in your own words, listen interiorly for God's quiet voice in your heart. Most spiritual directors teach that all types of vocal prayer, formulated or spontaneous, are good. Unless obliged by a community commitment, choose the manner of vocal prayer with which you are happiest. Some of us are very comfortable with a spontaneous prayer offered at any time of day – we simply talk out loud to God. Others feel far more at ease when we retire to a quiet spot and kneel down to pray in a more formal manner, with a prayer book or Rosary in hand. Both kinds of prayer are effective and appropriate.

Keep in mind that, even if we are more comfortable with one type of prayer, the Holy Spirit might lead us down a new path, especially when our usual mode of prayer seems stale and arid. Some of us resist a mode of prayer that others love, only to find it to be just what we need at a particular time in our lives.

A method some Catholics use to personalize formulated vocal prayer is to add your own name and circumstances to whatever prayer you are saying, such as "Thy kingdom come to me, Susan, on earth here in Ohio as it is in heaven," or "Pray for me, a sinner, now and at the hour of my death." Another favorite vocal method is to offer the short prayers known as "ejaculations" such as, "Jesus, I love you!" or "Holy God, I praise your name!"

R.C.

How do I imagine God responding to my prayer conversation with Him each day?

IN CLOSING...

"We must pray without tiring, for the salvation of mankind does not depend on material success … Neither does it depend on arms and human industries, but on Jesus alone."

ST. FRANCES CABRINI

Holy Spirit, come into my heart. Bring new life to the ancient prayers I learned as a child, and inspire me to voice my innermost thoughts to the God who knows them all. Amen.

Lesson Three

Meditation

Prayer: An Act of Hope
O My God, relying on Thy almighty power
and infinite mercy and promises,
I hope to obtain pardon of my sins, the help of thy grace,
and life everlasting, through the merits of
Jesus Christ, my Lord and Redeemer. Amen

WEEKLY THEME

Supported by consistent prayer, my daily life will be transformed.

WEEKLY GRACE

I pray for the grace to have a regular, established time of prayer each day.

Full of Grace: Read pages 34 - 37 in the text, then answer the following questions.

1. What is meditation, according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church?* What are the four faculties of the human person it involves?

2. What are the steps outlined in *Full of Grace* that we can use to meditate on Scripture in our time of prayer?

3. What questions can we ask ourselves to help us mine the rich treasure in a Scripture passage?

4. Using the steps you have outlined, turn in your Bible to Matthew 5 and meditate on verses 24 - 43. In the space provided below, write down any insights, reflections, or thoughts that came to you during this time.

KNOW THE FAITH

Where Did the Bible Come From?

The Bible is not a single book; in reality, it contains a library of literature spanning thousands of years and comprised of a variety of genres. The Bible is the God's revelation for mankind and the basis of all Catholic belief. The proclamation of Sacred Scripture has been part of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass since the earliest days of Christianity.

Written by human authors under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Old Testament traces the history of salvation, from Creation to the covenant God made with the Israelites in preparation for the coming of the Messiah, to the prophets who heralded His coming. The New Testament consists of the four Gospels and certain inspired writings from apostolic times.

According to Church Tradition, Scripture contains at least two different "senses" or interpretations — the literal sense and the spiritual sense (cf. CCC 115-119). As we study the Scriptures, our own interpretations must be guided, indeed subject, to the teaching authority of the Church. Only then are we are safeguarded against the error, confusion and conflict that can result from the misinterpretation of isolated Scripture passages.

Catholics will often hear other Christians say that the Bible alone contains all of Christian truth. This doctrine of *sola scriptura* was taught by Protestant reformers. While the Catholic Church affirms that Sacred Scripture teaches "firmly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted to put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation" (*Dei Verbum*, no. 11), the written Word of God is not the *only* source of teaching and guidance for God's people. Nowhere does the Bible teach this. What it does tell us, however, is to "stand firm and to "hold fast to the traditions you received…either by word or letter" (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

The key word here is *tradition*. A tradition is something that is passed on from one group to another, or handed down from one person to another. The Greek word for tradition *(paradosis)* is the word St. Paul uses to explain how he received the gospel of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:3-4) and what he then passed on to the early Christian communities (1 Corinthians 11:23). Oral tradition, communication through word of mouth, was the main means of passing on the teachings of Jesus in the early Church since a written Gospel did not exist until at least 60 A.D.

Catholic apologists, who explain the teachings of the Church in light of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, remind us that Jesus came not to give us a book, but to establish His Kingdom, His Church. And it is through His Church that the "canon," the official list of inspired writings, was determined. The bishops and elders of the Church, under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, discerned whether or not each manuscript was in agreement with the traditions they had received from the apostles. Once this canon was established, the bishops submitted themselves wholeheartedly to its truth; they protected, proclaimed, and taught these inspired teachings to those souls entrusted to them. This has been their call, mission, and holy office from then to the present day and for all time.

1. In your own words, explain the importance of both Scripture and Tradition for imparting wisdom and truth.

2. How does this understanding of the inspiration and development of Sacred Scripture deepen my appreciation of it and of the Church's guardianship of it?

WORD TO KNOW

Oratory: A place—usually private—set aside for prayer. Both lay and religious groups sometimes set up an oratory for their members. In the past, and in some places even now, kings and queens often had a personal oratory in their castles. There the monarch could pray, pouring out his or her heart, without being watched by the hundreds who lived within the castle. Today, many families throughout the world set aside a small area of the home for quiet, devotional prayer.

FOR PONDERING...

Meeting God in Meditation

Many Catholics claim to be too busy to read the Bible or other great spiritual literature. Usually this means that they have not discovered how enriching it is to meditate on the words that the Holy Spirit has inspired others to write down for our benefit. We might say, "Well I hear Scripture at Mass on Sunday. During the week I am too tired, I need to relax." Then, after chilling out in front of the TV or at the game board on the computer, we complain that we're stressed and tense and can hardly sleep!

Meditating on Scripture needs to be a regular part of your daily prayer time. During the dialogue we have with God that makes up our meditation, we may not "hear," even in the silence of our hearts, any distinct message from our beloved Lord. A holy sister, devoted to prayer, told me once that God spoke to her, not in words, but in silence. In a way, silence is the language of God. However, those led by this wordless path often see the truths of Scripture illustrated in daily life, in the beauty of a child's face or the roaring of the sea.

Sometimes God does seem to whisper a definitive message to our hearts. However, the Church teaches that we should never take such messages of private revelation to be infallible, especially if they urge action contrary to reason or tell us to spread concepts contrary to doctrine. Any such words must be taken to a competent spiritual director for discernment.

But that doesn't mean we must be "deaf" to whatever comes to us during meditative prayer. We have a right and even a duty to listen carefully to the inspirations given in prayer, especially because they bring light into the foggy darkness of our usual train of disgruntled, angry, or peevish conceptions about what is going on around us.

For example, if you were meditating on the Our Father, you might close your eyes and then hear God in your heart "saying" something like, "Dear little one, I am your Father who loves you. Have hope, all will be well." How encouraging!

If you have a busy day, a good time to meditate on the Bible or on other spiritual reading, is a short time just before going to sleep. Try this on a nightly basis for a while. Those who are learning how meaningful it is to take a real Sabbath on Sundays, will often include a time of meditation.

R.C.

Is there a small window of time that I've reserved for "myself" that I could spend in quiet meditation? What would this time be?

IN CLOSING...

"For perfected souls every place is to them an oratory; every moment a time of prayer."

ST. CATHERINE OF SIENNA

St. Augustine observed, "Thou has made us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." Jesus, you have promised to give rest to those who come to you. Have mercy on me and multiply my feeble efforts. Help me to not lose heart but persevere. Amen.

Lesson Four

Contemplation

Prayer: An Act of Faith
O My God, I firmly believe
that Thou art one God in three Divine Persons,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit;
I believe that Thy Divine Son became man,
and died for our sins,
and that He will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe these and all the truths that
the Holy Catholic Church teaches
because Thou hast reveal them,
Who canst neither deceive nor be deceived. Amen

WEEKLY THEME

Supported by consistent prayer, my daily life will be transformed.

WEEKLY GRACE

I pray for the grace to have a regular, established time of prayer each day.

Full of Grace: Read pages 37 - 42 and then answer the following questions.

1. In what three ways does contemplation differ from meditation?

   a. _____

   b. _____

   c. _____

According to Father Thomas Dubay, S.M., what one attribute of contemplation is the same for everyone?

_____

_____

2. What is "mystical union?"

_____

_____

_____

3. Reread the quotation from *Introduction to Spirituality*, by Father Louis Bouyer. How does faith conform us to itself? What definition of contemplation is implicit in the quote?

_____

_____

_____

4. What are three spiritual dangers in seeking the consolations of God rather than the God of consolation?

   a. _____

   b. _____

   c. _____

KNOW THE FAITH

The Battle of Prayer

St. Teresa of Avila said, "It is essential to begin the practice of prayer with a firm resolution of persevering in it." Implicit in this statement are two virtues absolutely essential to growing in prayer and the spiritual life – discipline and perseverance.

The necessity of these two virtues indicates something more to us as well. Prayer is not always easy. It requires effort. Paragraphs 2725-28 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tell us why this is so, and point out to us some of the major hindrances we may face. Look for the answers to the following questions as you read:

1. Who are the two enemies of prayer?

   a. _____

   b. _____

2. What are some *erroneous notions* about prayer? Ask yourself, "Have I ever held to any of them? If so, in what way?"

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

3. How can the *mentality* of "this present world" penetrate our life of prayer? Are any of these a challenge for me?

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

4. Which of the *failures* in prayer have I experienced in the past or am I now experiencing? What is the remedy?

WORD TO KNOW:

Mysticism: An experiential knowledge of God's presence in which the soul has a sense of contact with Him. This knowledge need not be accompanied by any psycho-physical phenomena such as visions or ecstasies. Mystical experiences are spiritual gifts that God gives to whom He wills; authentic mysticism cannot be induced by an act of human will.

FOR PONDERING...

Intimacy with God Is Transformative

A woman came up to me one day after a Bible class. "Will you pray for my husband?" she asked, launching into a litany of complaints and problems that could only be solved, she insisted, if her husband underwent a radical change. She had been praying for years but so far had seen no change. "I don't know why God hasn't answered my prayer."

I tried to explain that God gave her husband free will. When we pray for someone, God can answer our prayer by sending graces or by sending people to speak to the person we are praying for. If the person still won't listen, God sometimes sends problems so that the person becomes desperate and cries out for help. However, if a person refuses to say "yes" to God, God never overrides that person's free will, no matter how hard we pray.

"You must learn to be happy even if your husband doesn't change."

The woman's expression told me that this was not what she wanted to hear. "But I can't be happy if my husband doesn't change."

"Maybe that is the problem. You have made your husband the source of your happiness. If God were first in your life, then no one could take away your joy. Take your eyes off your husband and put them on God. Let God be the source of your joy."

I have had similar conversations with a number of women. Each time the woman decided to make God the source of her joy, miracles happened. In some cases, the woman discovered that her husband didn't need all that much changing, after all. Other times, when the wife stopped trying to change her husband, he decided to change on his own. Even in the most difficult cases, God gave these women peace in their hearts.

Each time we intercede on behalf of another, asking God to change that person, we must remember an important spiritual principle: Prayer transforms the one who prays as often as it affects the one for whom the prayer is offered.

D.O'L

Sometimes the best prayer to bring to God is "Lord, change me." In what area do I need to be transformed by God's action in me?

IN CLOSING...

"Not by… violence will [the Church] regain her beauty but through peace and through the constant and humble prayers and sweat and tears poured out by my servants with eager desire."

FROM THE WRITINGS OF ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA

Lord, let my life be a "living sacrifice" of praise. Give me grace to willingly offer up the slights and inconveniences that otherwise might rob me of joy. Teach me to recognize in every circumstance an opportunity to practice virtue and grow in faith. Amen.

Lesson Five

Effects of Prayer

Prayer: The Magnificat (Luke 1:49-50)

"The mighty God has done great things for me, and
Holy is His name.
His mercy reaches from age to age."

WEEKLY THEME

Supported by consistent prayer, my daily life will be transformed.

WEEKLY GRACE

I pray for the grace to have a regular, established time of prayer each day.

Full of Grace: Read pages 42 to 44, then answer the following questions.

1. What is the primary effect of prayer, and how is it seen?

2. In the story of the demoniac, at first the man was afraid to encounter Jesus. Ask yourself: "Have I ever been afraid of Jesus? Of what was I afraid?"

3. Sometimes we are reluctant to make necessary changes in our lives. We become comfortable with undesirable behaviors, and may even rationalize our sins. Have you ever experienced this in your life? Under what circumstances?

4. Jesus desires to heal us, transform us, and set us free. Ask yourself: "How can I cooperate with Him in the situation(s) I have listed above?"

KNOW THE FAITH

We never need to feel powerless over a particular weakness or fault. As the *Catechism* teaches, conversion of heart is God's work; if we ask Him to work in us, He is fully capable of renewing even the darkest and weakest recesses of our hearts.

Read Paragraphs 1430-32 in the *Catechism*, then answer the following questions.

1. How does interior conversion manifest itself? How have I seen this in my own life regarding a sin from which I have repented?

2. What does *animi cruciatus* and *compunctio cordis* mean? How does a penitent experience them?

3. What does "conversion" mean? (Hint: Reread Paragraph 1432.)

WORD TO KNOW

Compunction: ***This word comes from the Latin meaning "to puncture." Compunction is a "prick of the conscience;" a deep uneasiness of regret and sorrow; true remorse.***

FOR PONDERING...

Banish Confusion

As you read through the story of the demoniac of Gerasenes, you may not identify with him. You don't spend time running around a cemetery half-clothed, screaming and howling, tormented by a legion of awful demons. You may, however, have one secret demon tormenting you, something you would like to change, have tried to change, but found that the problem keeps coming back to haunt you.

Looking around the *Woman of Grace*® group, you might think, "Everyone else here is so pulled together. If they really knew me, they would probably kick me out of the group!" But the truth is, most of us have, or have had, secret demons tormenting us.

The Good News is that Jesus came to set us free from all oppression. For some of us, the change we experience will be as dramatic as it was for the demoniac; for others, only their confessor will know the profound nature of their transformation in Christ.

If you have a secret problem and you want to be free, start by going to confession. If you have already confessed this problem and nothing has changed, don't despair. Keep going back. You may be ashamed to go back and confess the same thing, but persevere. Tell Jesus that you really want to be free.

I had such a secret torment. I went to confession every week or so and confessed the same failure for over a year. It seemed the more I went to confession, the more often I failed. I couldn't understand why didn't Jesus immediately set me free! The truth was that although I didn't like the consequences of my problem, I didn't really want to change. It was as if I were sitting too close to a fire and the only way Jesus could get me to move was to make the fire hotter.

The situation continued to deteriorate, until finally I decided that I had had enough. I was ready to let go. Then while I was in prayer, I suddenly saw the error in my thinking that was at the root of the problem. From that moment, I was free from the torment. Only then was I able to be the person God wanted me to be—at least in that area of my life.

D.O'L

Ask yourself: "Is there a secret sin that I am harboring in my life?" If the answer is yes, ask the Lord to help you think of three practical ways to overcome it.

IN CLOSING...

"God... does not desire the death of a sinner, but magnanimously awaits his return to Him."

ST. MARY OF EGYPT

Try as I might, Lord, I can never hide from Your all-seeing eyes. Nor should I want to, for You alone can bring healing and wholeness to the broken places of my life. Give me courage, God, to trust your mercy. Amen.