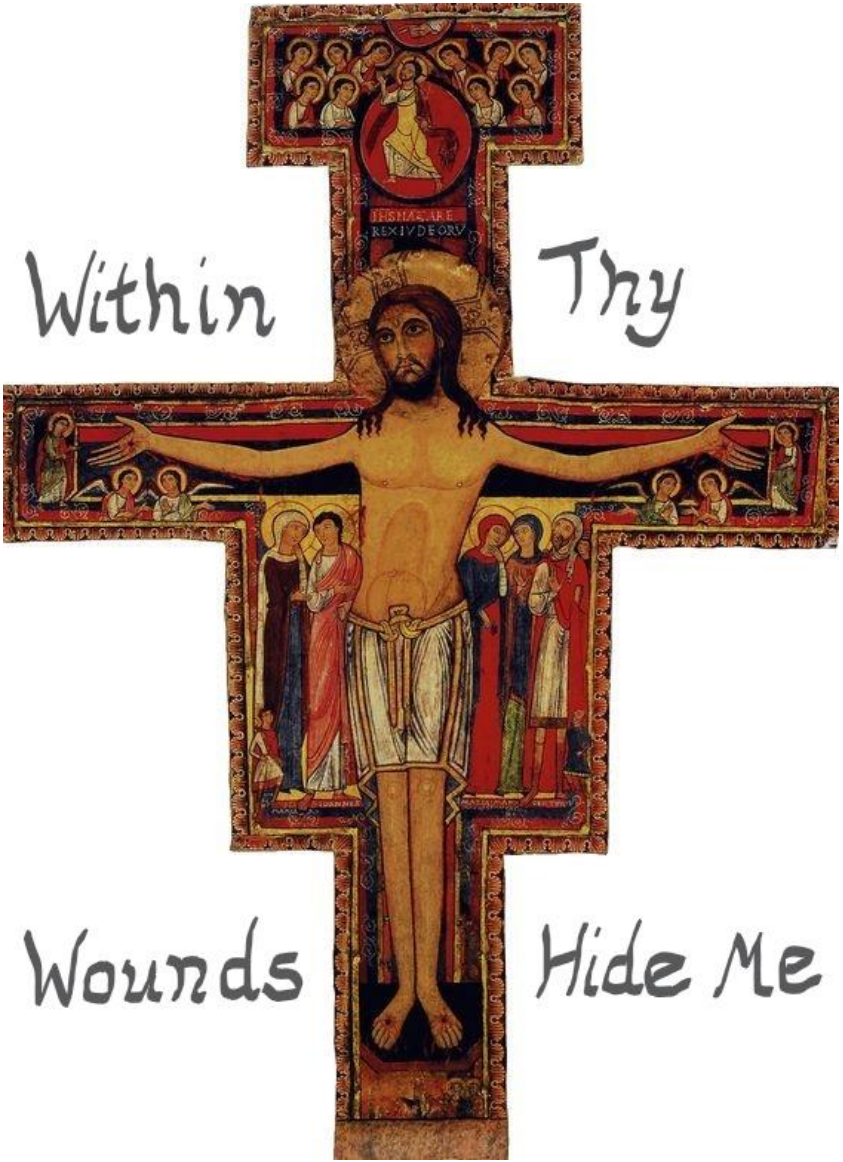


Within

Thy



Wounds

Hide Me

WITHIN THY WOUNDS HIDE ME

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Preface

I wrote most of this book during the Easter season of the year 2020, at a time when the whole world was dealing with the infamous Coronavirus, a pandemic that revealed the wounds of humanity's insecurity, otherwise nicely hidden by the media's illusion of physical, social and economic security. With so much anxiety in the world and even within the Church, the resurrection victory of Christ restored a correct perspective. Even though most churches were closed for Holy Week and much of the Easter season, the virus wasn't able to steal Easter away from us! The Lord entered into many homes that were "locked" out of fear of the virus and proclaimed the peace of His resurrection to families and communities. Through the internet, (and other socially distanced means), the "stones" cried out that the Lord of heaven and earth, who experienced something far worse than Covid-19, has far more than recovered from it. His glorious wounds continue to proclaim this truth.

As with any son of St. Francis, meditating on the stigmata has always been part of my religious life. I am indebted to one of our founders, Fr. Andrew Apostoli, CFR, originally from the Stigmata Province of the Capuchins, for the spark that came from his preaching at Mass for the profession of vows, on how the three vows that we make are represented by the stigmata. He said that *poverty* is represented by the wounded hands that cannot grasp anything for themselves, *chastity* by the heart that offers the struggles related to celibacy, and *obedience* by the feet fastened to the cross. That spark of an idea grew into a steady blaze of meditations for me over the years, which I have shared mostly with CFR Friars and Sisters, and some other consecrated religious.

Although some of these meditations may speak more to the Franciscan family (especially as we draw near to the 800th anniversary of the stigmata of St. Francis), my hope is that any

Christian who reads this will benefit from meditating in this way on our Savior and Divine Healer. If someone is asking the question, “*How can I be more united with Jesus?*” they will have a reason to read this. If someone hasn’t asked that question, I would suggest that they ask the Lord for the *desire* to be united with Him before reading any further.

The book of Jesus’ wounds is open for all people at all times. Therefore, I’m not interested in seeking a copyright for this material. It can be shared in any way, but I would simply ask readers to respect the integrity of the text. If a publisher decides to print it someday to make it more easily available, then let it be done, Amen.

Thank you to all of the CFR Friars and Sisters who inspire me to seek to know the Lord Jesus ever more fully. Thanks in particular to Fr. Guiseppe Sinischalchi, CFR, who jokingly mentioned in a homily some years ago to remember John 20:20 like 20/20 vision. That comment inspired the title for the first chapter and the thought that the year of our Lord, 2020, was the right time to write this.

Fr. Richard Roemer, CFR
July 16, 2020

CHAPTER 1

20/20 Vision

On the evening of the first day of the week, when the disciples were together with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

- The Gospel of St. John, Chapter 20:19-20

He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and feet. It is I myself!...."

- The Gospel of St. Luke, 24:38-39a

To say that the Word became flesh is to say that the Word became wounded, that He embraced all the wounds of our flesh. However, those wounds are also "words," universal words or symbols in a universal language, that any man or woman, illiterate or highly educated, should be able to understand. Every man and woman has been wounded, and can understand how physical wounds can be symbolic of emotional or spiritual wounds. We may speak of a complex situation as a "real headache" and of a broken relationship as a "real heartache." We might feel like we are "limping along" even if our legs are perfectly healthy.

When the Lord Jesus rose from the dead and showed Himself to His apostles, He made sure to show them His wounded hands and feet and side. St. John tells us that when the apostles saw His hands and side they knew they were seeing the Lord and they were filled with joy. Hence in John 20:20, the apostles finally receive 20/20 vision of who He is! St. Thomas insists on seeing and touching those wounds for himself, and when he does he gives us the clearest proclamation in the Gospel of Jesus's identity and nature - "My Lord and my God!"

In the Gospel of St. Luke, the risen Jesus tells the apostles to look at his hands and feet and thereby to recognize Him. The primary sense of the phrase "It is I myself" in Luke 24:39 (Greek = Ego eimi autos) must be "It's me, the same man who was nailed hands and feet to the Cross!" May we also interpret this powerful little sentence, with its two personal pronouns for emphasis, in a broader and more timeless way? Perhaps it could be paraphrased - "This is as me as I get!" That is, the vision of the resurrected Lord with His wounds is the fullest revelation of Himself.

In a discourse on Psalm 148, St. Augustine speaks about our experience of the two liturgical seasons of Lent and Easter. He says, "The season before Easter signifies the troubles in which we live here and now, while the time after Easter...signifies the happiness that will be ours in the future. What we commemorate before Easter is what we experience in this life, what we celebrate after Easter points to something we do not yet possess....Both of these periods are represented and demonstrated for us in Christ our Head." Because of our limited "vision," it is helpful for us to focus at one time on the crucifixion and at another time on the resurrection. The stigmata signify both times at once, proclaiming the unity in Christ of death and resurrection. He is always and forever the "Lamb that was slain" and also fully "the Life."

The "Franciscan" crucifix of San Damiano, which we look upon daily in our friary chapel, proclaims the paschal mystery with a particular fullness. As Pope Francis pointed out when he visited Assisi on October 4, 2013, "On that cross Jesus is depicted not as dead, but alive! Blood is flowing from his wounded hands and side, but that blood speaks of life. Jesus' eyes are not closed but open."

The wounds of the risen Christ are a summary of the paschal mystery written in His flesh. To say that is to say a great deal, but is that even enough? Could His statement "It is I myself" as he reveals His wounds to his disciples imply that His stigmata tell more of a story even than the events of Good Friday through

Easter Sunday? Might we dare to say that the wounds of His hands and feet and side actually tell the story, in a symbolic way, of the entire life of our Savior? Might we think of them as a real visual summary of His mission and even of His divinity? This is precisely the line of meditation that we are daring to follow.

One can think of meditation as shining a bright light on a dimly lit sculpture. The sight of the sculpture might be familiar, but a brighter light might help a person to see dimensions and details that one didn't notice before. We ask the Holy Spirit to brighten our minds and hearts in this way as we meditate upon our Savior's stigmata.

As Christians we seek not only to know Christ, but nothing less than to become one with Him, that we "might live no longer for ourselves, but for Him who died and rose for us" (cf. 2 Cor 5:15). We can work toward that oneness in various ways. We can think about how Jesus would act or speak in a given situation. (Some may recall the popular abbreviation "WWJD" for "What would Jesus do?") We can examine our day to ask Him when we were acting or speaking on our own or when He was acting or speaking in us, or if He felt comfortable dwelling within us throughout the day. Another way, proposed here, is looking at our Savior's stigmata as a symbolic summary of His daily life and ministry, and conforming ourselves to His cross as He experienced it throughout the course of His life. Our Lord said to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, "From the first moment of my Incarnation, the cross was planted in my Heart." Understanding how Jesus took up the cross interiorly through His Incarnation, His hidden life, and during His public ministry can help us to identify with Him more in our daily lives, and see how we can take up the cross with Him in our daily lives. For example, consecrated men and women religious seek to live hidden in Christ, hidden in His wounds, through the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Others are hidden in Christ by daily offerings within family life and the workplace.

St. Bonaventure said, "We do not apply the term 'passion' only to the day on which He died, but to the whole course of his life; for the entire life of Christ was an example and a martyrdom" (Vit. Myst. V.n2). When St. Paul said he wanted "only to know Christ and the power of His resurrection by reproducing the pattern of His death" (Phil 3:10), he probably was thinking of reproducing something more than actual Roman crucifixion, but more like the whole pattern of Christ's life that His wounds represent.

St. Bernard of Clairveaux, while preaching on the depth of God's love revealed in the Song of Songs, saw the wounds of Christ as the clearest revelation of that love and said:

Where else can we, frail men, find rest and security, but in the wounds of our Savior? The greater the saving power of these wounds, the more safely sheltered do I feel in them....But the nail that made its way into His flesh has turned out to be the key to the mystery of His designs. How can we fail indeed to see through such wide openings?.... The secret of His Heart is therefore laid bare in the wounds of His body....How could You indeed, Lord, show us more clearly than by your wounds that You are indeed all goodness and mercy and abounding in love, since the greatest love a man can show is to lay down his life for his friends? (Sermon 61)

Once on a train in Oregon, a Baptist man asked me in a kindly way why Catholics always have crucifixes in their churches - was it because we didn't believe that Jesus rose from the dead? I assured him that we believed in the resurrection, but that looking upon Him that way reminds us of the depth of His love, and in such a way even just by looking upon His wounds we are healed, (like the Israelites in the desert who were healed by looking at the image of the serpent on the pole). This message of His healing love was written clearly on His body for His apostles to read, long before any of them were able to write it down upon parchments.

Many holy Capuchin friars, like St. Conrad of Parzham, spoke of the crucifix as their "book" of meditation. They knew how to read those wounds, even if they didn't write about them.

The early biographer of St. Francis, friar Thomas of Celano, tells us that after Francis received a word from Christ in the crucifix of San Damiano, "the wounds of the sacred Passion were impressed deep in his heart, though not yet in his flesh" and that from then on the Passion was "constantly before his eyes." (2 Cel, chapter 6). What was manifested miraculously, probably for the first time in history, was interiorly present in his mind and heart. Would that all of us, followers of Christ, would carry and ponder in our hearts, like Our Lady, the sign of his wounds. For obvious reasons, St. Francis will be a primary example (and intercessor we pray!), as we consider how to be united with our Savior's wounds in our daily lives.

Mind you, I'm not talking about carrying the stigmata in some weird, esoteric way. Once when I was in Fr. Benedict Groeschel's office, he was opening a letter from a woman who was starting a new community. She promised that everyone who joined would receive the invisible stigmata upon entering! We're not talking about that! However, in a more modest way, all of us are invited to mine the riches of His wounds, and not only to carry them, but in a sense to be carried by them throughout our lives.

Some readers may find this trail of meditation unfamiliar, perhaps too corporeal at one moment and too symbolic at another, before applying it all to our daily lives. If so, it may be that modern Christian writers don't pay much attention to physical symbols, or if they do it tends toward Eastern spirituality. But part of the amazing lordship of Jesus evident in the Gospels is that He was very intentional in working physical miracles with symbolic significance. For example, he chides His apostles to consider more deeply the symbolism of twelve baskets of leftovers when He multiplied the loaves and fishes in Jewish territory for the 5000, and the seven baskets leftover when he

multiplied the loaves in pagan territory for the 4000. (Perhaps twelve for all of the tribes of the people of the five books of Moses, and the perfect number seven for the people of all 4 directions.) Having Peter walk on water, smearing mud from His saliva on a blind man, and so many other miracles are clearly intended to speak to us in many physically symbolic ways.

Our dear philosopher-pope, St. John Paul II, gave the world deeper insight into the language of the body and how it speaks symbolically of the spiritual significance of our human nature. His "theology of the body" is a very positive and profound approach to the meaning of the body. When the Lord invited his earliest members of the Church to look upon His wounds on Easter day, wasn't He inviting them to begin to develop a theology of *His* body first of all?

"Look at my hands and feet and side. And look again...and again! It is really I myself!"

Perhaps we should ask His help in prayer before we continue:

Lord Jesus, I adore You, true God and true man, and I adore Your wounds that reveal Your love for me and for all of your disciples in every time and place. Hide us in Your wounds O Lord. Help us to enter into them and let them enter into us, so that we may know You and love You more deeply, and be more fully united with You. Amen.

Wounded Hands; The Son of the Creator and Son of the Carpenter

“May Your right hand work great wonders.” (Ps 45:4)

“Why do You keep Your right hand hidden?” (Ps 74:11)

Many years ago, the New York Science Times published an article about the Hubble telescope that was sending images from deep space back to earth. One of the color-enhanced photos showed a part of the universe that was expanding in the formation of new galaxies. It showed five protrusions of new galaxies, like five fingers, that one astronomer described as almost seeing “the hand of God” extending outward and creating new worlds.

All of that power is in the hands of Jesus of Nazareth.

We profess in the creed, as St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Colossians (1:16), that "through Him all things were made." As the astronomers tell us, creation is still being created; the Creator hasn't yet completed the work of His hands. Isn't it amazing that while you and I are pestering the Lord about finding our lost keys, or getting over a cold, He is also occupied with creating new stars and planets? He is directing with His hands the great symphony of the movements of the stars, the relationship of unseen insects in the jungle, and all the while listening to us whispering or shouting in His ear.

The Old Testament refers more than 500 times to the power of God's right hand. Whether in praise or in pleading, the people of Israel believed in the immense strength of the Lord, while being limited to symbolic and anthropomorphic language to speak about it.

All of that strength is in the hands of Jesus of Nazareth.

Yet the Lord Jesus had human hands with human limitations as well. This is the mystery of His poverty, His self-emptying Incarnation that didn't grasp at recognition of His divinity and power while He walked among us on the earth that He also created. For a time He had the tiny hands of an infant, learning how to hold tiny objects. He was known as a "tekton" in Greek (Mk 6:3), a carpenter or, more accurately, a builder or construction worker, and was the son of a construction worker (Mt 13:55). The skeptics were partially correct to recognize his humble trade, but they didn't realize that He was at the same time the Builder of the universe and the Son of the Divine Tekton, God the Father. They had no idea that He had constructed every atom and strand of DNA that made up their own flesh. How often they had prayed, "It was your hands that made me and shaped me" (Ps 119:73), and now they were belittling those hands in front of them.

Our Savior embraced this poverty of wounded hands, hands pierced through so as not to retain anything for Himself. Wounded hands summarize most of the years that Jesus spent on earth, hidden in the school of poverty in Nazareth, with hands wounded by manual labor. Most likely His hands were physically wounded with splinters and blisters from His labors. Is it unlikely that the Son of Man accidentally let a hammer slip and hit his finger, since He was like us in all things but sin? Perhaps He considered such accidents as a preparation to accept the nails that would be hammered through His hands at Calvary.

"These hands were made for chalices, not callouses," has been the excuse of the occasional seminarian trying to get out of work, hopefully in jest. However, the true and only High Priest spent over half of His life gaining callouses and only one evening of His earthly life celebrating the "first Mass." Moreover, that first Mass actually included the carrying of the cross on Good Friday.

We can presume that at least 15 years, or about half of His lifetime, was spent hidden in manual labor, unseen and uneventful. We must ask ourselves, "What did He gain by this?" He could have built remarkable bridges or coliseums or even skyscrapers, but He didn't do any such feats. What He spoke of figuratively, about destroying the Temple and rebuilding it in three days, He could easily have done literally and impressed his accusers. Instead, He left nothing remarkable during all of those years, and archeologists won't find any work of His with His signature on it.

What He did construct however, was the *dignity* of manual labor. Spending so much of His lifetime in manual labor raised up the dignity of that work, so that it may be a participation in His offering to the Father. We say that when a priest is offering Mass, he is in a unique way "in persona Christi", in the person of Christ making that offering. Yet by His participation in manual labor, Christ gave every Christian an everyday means of being united with Him. We can in a subjective sense be "in persona Christi" as we lay bricks or as we sweep the floor - and sweep it again tomorrow and again the next day! By allowing His hands to be wounded alongside of other workers, Christ sanctified such work and made it a means of sanctification. Of course, a conscious awareness of His presence with us and a willing offering of the work with Him will make it more spiritually fruitful.

It may have been His intention to spend so many years as a builder to prepare Himself physically to carry the cross. Perhaps there were weeks in a row where He was daily picking up cross-beams to build a barn. Although the spiritual weight of our sins is what made the cross so heavy, let's not forget the physical reality of it.

That reality was brought home to me once during Lent when I participated in the early morning Via Crucis with the friars and hundreds of the faithful in Matagalpa, Nicaragua. I saw that the men carrying the big float with the crucifixion scene were

suffering under the weight of it, so I decided to join in and lend a shoulder for a while. I couldn't believe how HEAVY it was, how crushingly painful it felt. It was only when the weight of that crucifixion scene sunk deeply into my shoulder that the real physical weight of the historical Crucifixion sunk into my mind. With that reality came the thought that being a construction worker must have prepared our Lord physically for the weight of the Cross. The moral weight of our sins had a physical, painfully fleshly reality to it. That may be why He spent a whole 15 years at it – everything in His life seemed to be directed to Calvary.

It is true that manual labor may prepare us as well for other missions that the Lord has in mind for us. When St. Francis was told by the Lord to go and rebuild His church, he began with stones and mortar, and rebuilt three little churches in Assisi. Some say that Francis eventually caught on that the Lord was speaking symbolically of His Church as a whole, which is true. However, realizing his mission of renewing the Church doesn't mean that he saw the physical repairs as a mistake. He didn't see physical labor as a waste of his time. He desired throughout the rest of his life to work with his hands and he encouraged his friars to do the same, as he wrote in his last testament. No doubt, he understood the imitation and following of Christ to include working with his hands. It was naturally an expression of Jesus' poverty.

For these reasons, the friars who founded our Community wrote in the first chapter of our Constitutions that manual labor is an "essential component" of our little reform. What was good enough for the Lord to spend most of his earthly time at, and imitated by St. Francis, is also good for us.

Fr. Emmanuel Mansford, CFR, tells the story of how as a postulant he felt like he was wasting all of his time sanding chairs. He was thinking of the missions of evangelization he had done before joining the friars and the more important achievements that he could be doing for the glory of God and yet day after day

he was sanding chairs and sanding chairs. Finally, in a moment of grace it dawned on him – what was getting sanded down was really his ego more than the chairs!

The first General Servant of our Community, Fr. Benedict Groeschel, as busy as he was counselling bishops and priests and everyone else, used to cook for the entire Community in the early days when we would meet every Wednesday in the Bronx. I've been told by the Missionaries of Charity that St. (Mother) Teresa insisted on cleaning the bathroom at the convent in Kolkota until her final days. Obviously, she and Fr. Benedict understood the spiritual significance of manual labor.

St. Veronica Giuliani was an amazing nun, a Capuchiness, who had to overcome a strong personal repulsion toward manual labor in the monastery. Not only did she become extremely generous in seeking the lowliest tasks of cleaning, but she also became a stigmatist. Her mother, who had passed away when Veronica was seven years old, had spiritually “assigned” one of the wounds of Christ to each of her five daughters on her deathbed. All of them eventually entered the monastery. One can presume that St. Veronica saw manual labor as a way of being united with the wounds in Christ’s hands, which she eventually received miraculously in her own.

Even the endless paper work that occupies so many people today can be a means of unity with Christ. One of our friars, Fr. Luke Fletcher, has often reminded our seminarians that paper also comes from wood and it does get heavy! It is often tedious and hidden work, but never hidden from the Lord. Whatever the manner, St. John Paul II confirmed that “in bearing the fatigue of labor in union with Christ crucified for us, we collaborate with the Son of God in the redemption of humanity” (*Laborem exercens*, 27).

We have many daily opportunities to unite ourselves with the wounded hands of Christ, when we practice a spirit of

detachment toward our work. We mop the floor and immediately someone walks in with muddy sandals; we're making our perfect spaghetti sauce and someone walks in and adds jalapeño peppers to it; we fix a taillight on the car and the next day someone backs it into a tree! It is proverbial in the religious life that one friar will plant tomatoes in the garden and another friar will eat them (since the first friar has been moved on to another friary). We can falsely develop our self-worth by the work of our hands and then be asked to let it go. What does our identity rest upon then?

Those who work in service professions, such as counsellors, police, firefighters, doctors, nurses, religious ministers, etc. are required to practice this detachment as well. The person in whom they invest great energy in a time of crisis on any given day may never return to say thank you or to give them an update on his or her life. The Lord Jesus experienced this when He cured ten lepers and only one came back to thank Him. We will ponder this more in the next chapter.

St. Francis was clear in his desire not to grasp at any work as his own. His "Admonitions," a series of meditations and counsels he wrote for the friars, overflow with this attitude of interior poverty. His second admonition insightfully speaks of the original sin of Adam and Eve as grasping at what wasn't really theirs. Francis realized that even beautiful works done for the Lord can be an obstacle when we cling to them. For example, one day he was admiring a little clay pot that he had made. When he realized that he was distracted from prayer by that work of his hands, he immediately threw it into a fire. However, the greater offering that was asked of him later on was to hand over the future of the order, "his" order, to the Lord, and to other friars who didn't share the same vision as he did.

Such radical poverty of spirit is still surpassed infinitely more by the One who could hold the whole world in His hands, but chose not to grasp onto the littlest part of it for Himself. Even

the glorified body of Jesus retains the symbol of wounded hands, since He eternally desires all glory to go to the Father.

Let us pray:

Not to us, O Lord Jesus, but to Your Name be the glory.

We adore You who are Son of the Creator and son of the carpenter.

We glorify Your poverty, Lord Jesus.

We glorify Your humility.

We glorify Your non-grasping wounded hands.

May our daily labors be a means and not an obstacle to our union with You.

Amen.

The Wounded Helping Hand

"You stretch out your hand and save me; your hand will do all things for me. Your love O Lord is eternal; discard not the work of your hands" (Ps 138:7-8).

"By His wounds you were healed." (1 Pt 2:24)

On the other hand, literally the other hand of Christ, we may meditate upon His hand reaching out to help the poor and the sick. Here we see His power revealed not only as the Creator, but as the Re-creator and Healer of creation. How often that power of healing was unleashed through those sacred hands, for the sick, the blind, the lame, the mute, the leper, the neglected, and the abandoned. How they longed to touch Him. Many of our prayerful songs today still express that longing for His touch.

Think for a moment of any popular faith healer that you may have seen on television or at a big event. What is a healing event typically like? Usually there is high-quality music and a stage to see the healer more clearly. Often there is a sense of drama, of a rising emotional wave of expectation by a raising of the voice and dramatic gestures....

Now think about the accounts of Jesus' healings in the Gospels. Where is the show? There isn't anything at all like that. It is quite the opposite. He pulls people away from the crowd to heal them. He asks them not to tell anyone. He heals inside little houses with the crowd outside. He doesn't shout or cry out when He heals, as Isaiah had correctly prophesied (cf Mt.12:15-21). His divine authority and divine humility go hand-in-hand.

His hands contained both the power and the tenderness of

the Father, as Rembrandt portrayed the hands of the father in his painting of the Prodigal Son. They were hands capable of representing Divine strength and Divine mercy. Those hands of the only God-man responded to the plea of the psalmist on our behalf: "You stretch out your hand and save me; your hand will do all things for me" (Ps 138:7). Those are the glorious hands that we nailed to the Cross.

The wound of rejection was given to those healing hands long before Calvary. He was truly the wounded Healer throughout His ministry. His kindness was met by ingratitude and accusations, sometimes even from the very people whom He had healed and given new life. He appropriately re-created people on the Sabbath, for example the man with the withered hand (Mt 12:10-14); but the Pharisees plotted to kill Jesus because he healed the man's hand on the Sabbath. He often told those whom he healed not to tell anyone, but they did so anyway, thereby making His mission more difficult (Mt 9:31). He healed those possessed by demons and sometimes people responded by asking Him to go away from their district (Mt 8:34), or worse, by accusing him of casting out demons by the power of the prince of demons (Mt 12:24). Already the paschal mystery was taking place in His ministry and already it was "by His wounds (that) we are healed" (Is 53:5-6 & 1 Pt 2:24).

When he expresses His compassion and kindness in another way, by multiplying bread to feed the hungry crowd, many focus on that earthly food and walk away from Him when He offers them Heavenly food (Jn 6:66). Even His disciples seem to quickly forget that miraculous provision and miss its significance (Mt 16:9). These are just some of the examples of how He was continually wounded during His public ministry by offering a helping hand and a healing hand. Unlike most dogs, fallen humanity will "bite" the Hand that feeds us. Nevertheless, those wounds experienced in His ministry already began to overflow with a deeper mercy that brought deeper healing.

His power to forgive sins was already linked with His power to heal in the case of the paralytic man in Luke 5:17-26. Although the paralytic and some in the crowd respond by praising God, the scribes and Pharisees nail Him with the accusation of blasphemy. The anger that He received in return for this kind of healing certainly previews the nailing of His sacred hands to the Cross. No doubt He was already praying, "Father, forgive them; for they don't know what they are doing."

Already the power of His forgiveness was flowing with a consistently merciful and patient response that revealed a Divine triumph. It would culminate in the repeated offer of "peace" and the gift of forgiveness handed on to the Apostles when He showed them His wounded hands after the resurrection. It is a peace that we share in, not by denying the reality of sin or injustice, but by forgiving it in His Name.

How do Christians conform themselves to the wounded helping hand of Christ?

It is clear that St. Francis was united interiorly with the wounded hand of Christ by helping the poor. Even before his conversion, he had the grace of being generous with the poor. He grew in this generosity by responding to Jesus' invitation to the rich young man in the Gospels to give all that he had to the poor (cf Mk 10:17ff). This became a key passage in the rule he wrote for his friars, helping them to understand that poverty was linked with generosity.

Still, it is one thing to give to the poor from a safe social distance. It is another to draw personally close enough to let our helping hands to be wounded, what we call in our CFR Constitutions "hands-on work with the poor." This was the victory within St. Francis when he overcame his fear of the lepers and embraced one. It was indeed a manifestation of the triumph of the cross when Francis was able to reach out and touch that leper, so that what was formerly bitter within him was changed to

sweetness. Undoubtedly his efforts later on were sometimes met with ingratitude by those whom he was serving and certainly with misunderstanding by those who looked on from a safe distance. Undoubtedly he recognized in this another way of being united with the experience of the One whose footsteps he sought to follow.

How are we united with this hand of Christ extended in works of mercy? Consecrated religious, like that rich young man, are called to sell what we have and give to the poor; our life of poverty is meant to be a fountain of generosity and charity. It doesn't happen only once when we enter. It is ongoing, because all of the time, energy, and talent that we could be using to build up a personal bank account or to lease that impressive new sports car are being spent instead on giving a poor person a new lease on life.

Like all Christians who seek to give of themselves to the poor or to the sick, sometimes our hands will be wounded. Sometimes our efforts will be rewarded by ingratitude or by anger or even by accusations of injustice. Sometimes we may question whether or not our service is making a difference, or even if we are practicing what has been called "toxic charity." Sometimes with consternation after being lied to by someone we tried to help, we ask ourselves, "Should I send them away or should I invest even more time and energy to help them?" In these moments, we can remember the wounded hands of Jesus and ask Him to take our hands and make them His own. With that prayer, we trust that He will make our hands both strong and gentle, like His love.

It was said of St. Frances de Sales that when he had to say "no" to a request from a poor person, he was able to do so with such kindness and humility that the person would walk away as contented as if he or she had received material help. Apparently, he had come to a peaceful acceptance of his own limitations, the

poverty of his helping hand, so that he could give the Lord's peace to others in their disappointments.

The experience of our limitations in helping others leads us to accept our real human poverty. We cannot fix people like we can fix a window or a sink. When dealing with addicts or children with a lack of family formation, we have to face up to our poverty and powerlessness to make everything just right for them. However, we can entrust them to the Divine Doctor and Shepherd of Souls, whose hands continually lift up His children out of the mire.

At such times, when we realize that we can't actually carry the whole world, it is helpful to remember the contrast of two statues on 5th Ave. and 50th St. in New York. On one side there is "Atlas" at Rockefeller Center, representing self-reliant humankind, who struggles under the weight of the world on his shoulders. Across the street, inside St. Patrick's Cathedral, is a statue (and paintings) of the baby Jesus with the world in his little hands, as if saying, "No sweat! I can carry the world. Just hand it over to me!"

We recall how our Lord sent out the disciples without money or supplies to carry, but gave them His word and the power to heal (cf Mt 10). There is a kind of healing that money can't buy and might even prevent. That is, when we have to trust more directly in His grace and not in our own resources, He is able to work with a more divine efficiency. This was another key passage for St. Francis, which made it clear to him and his friars that voluntary poverty is meant to increase our faith and trust and reliance on the Lord.

St. Peter said to the lame man at the temple "Look at us!... Silver and gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up and he began to walk. (Acts 3:4-7) The Blood of Christ that flows from poor, non-grasping, wounded hands brings healing and re-creates people in a supernatural way.

As Pope St. John Paul II wrote in *Redemptoris Donum* (27), “God is able to bestow gifts through a poor man in a greater manner than through any amount of material resources, because He is able to bestow them in the manner of the Poor Man par excellence, our Lord Jesus Christ.”

That manner or attitude of the Lord Jesus also means putting our heart into our service of others. Mother Teresa often said, “In your service to the poor, do not give only your hands but also your heart.” I was struck one time by a little crucifix that I found in one of our friaries, in which one of Jesus’ arms was broken at the shoulder. As I looked at His hand and arm just hanging from the cross, disconnected from his heart, I realized that my helping hand is like that sometimes. I might be serving food to a poor person, but without any real interest in that person, without my heart connecting at all. That needs to be corrected even more than a broken crucifix.

St. Gregory the Great understood what it meant to be a wounded healer like Christ when he said, “It is characteristic of holy men that their own painful trials do not make them lose their concern for the well-being of others. They are grieved by the adversity they must endure, yet they look out for others and teach them needed lessons; they are like gifted physicians who are themselves stricken and lie ill. They suffer wounds themselves but bring others the medicine that restores health.”

There is a mysterious reality in Christian service that we are ministering TO Christ in our needy brother or sister and also ministering WITH Christ, representing Him to others. This is a fullness rather than a contradiction. When ministering WITH Him, we recall His humble, quiet approach to healing without any kind of show. He continues His healing work in the world today through ordinary people and natural means, or “secondary causes,” but it is still His grace at work. When we wonder how we could be ministering TO Him, we might ponder the infinite depths

of His compassion, His “suffering-with” as com-passion means in its root. In other words, He who took our sins upon Himself also identifies so much with suffering humanity that He becomes suffering humanity.

A medical internist, working at a hospital in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, gave testimony to this in a long phone message to some friends, which I was also able to listen to. She was recounting, with a tired and sobbing voice, her experience of trying to take care of forty COVID patients at the same time. There wasn’t enough oxygen for them all, so the patients were trying to share it with each other, but some were fading away. As they prayed together, the doctor said she experienced something more than just asking God to help them all. She said she had a new and strange sense that the Lord was with them in the room suffering and crying with them. It was evident that His mysterious presence strengthened her in a way that she couldn’t explain.

Some may still cry out angrily or even in humble, sincere questioning, “But why can’t He heal everyone? Why doesn’t He just heal everyone? What difference does His presence make if He’s not healing them?” In such moments of questioning, it might be helpful to keep in mind that the Divine Doctor is also an obstetrician. That is, He is present at the hour of death to coax us along in our painful passage out of this world and deliver us into the celestial world of eternal light. The awareness of His presence at that crucial moment gives us a certain hope, a kind of umbilical cord that is cut once we are able to see Him face to face in all His glory. Unlike our entrance into this world, we won’t be crying when we arrive there!

The Lord Jesus didn’t physically heal every infirm person in the world during His time on earth, nor does He in our own time, but He does provide every single spiritually ill person with the restoration of spiritual health and eternal life as long as they sincerely turn to Him, the Divine Physician. He took the virus of sin upon Himself so as to heal us from it forever, that we might

have life in abundance.

When we are trying to walk alongside of someone who has lost hope and we don't know what to say or do, we can take heart from the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Before Jesus revealed His presence in the breaking of the bread, or even in the breaking open of the Scriptures, He began walking alongside them as they were fraternally sharing their broken hearts. Simply with His presence in the brotherhood of those disciples walking together, their hearts began to burn again with hope.

So we ask Him to walk with us in a similar way:

*Lord Jesus, I place my whole world in Your divine hands.
Thank You Lord for your boundless generosity and kindness to me.
Please continue to extend Your mercy and healing upon the world.
I place my poor hands into Your poor hands O Lord,
that You may work with Divine efficiency through me
and make me a wounded healer with You. Amen.*

Both Arms and Hands Lifted Up

*"Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help,
as I lift up my hands toward your Most Holy Place." (Ps 28:2)*

"I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer." (1Tm 2:8)

We have reflected on one hand of Christ wounded in the poverty of hidden labor. On the other hand, we considered the wounded Healer of mankind. Now we will consider both hands as we usually look upon them in the opened-armed gesture of Jesus on the Cross. These raised and wounded hands may speak to us of another more interior aspect of Christ's poverty and our own.

How many days and nights did Our Savior pray to the Father with His arms open and hands lifted up in the classic "orans" position? The lifting up of His hands in prayer, late at night or early in the morning, seeking His Father in the poverty of our humanity, is another experience of His life that we are invited to share in, another pathway leading us to unity with Him.

When someone says, "I surrender," what gesture do they naturally make? The policeman says "Don't move!" and immediately we lift up our empty hands. The body language of raising up arms and hands seems to be universally understood as a sign of docility. In a real sense, the position of Jesus' arms and hands on the cross is a statement of His consistent interior disposition before the Father. He was always, at every moment, surrendered to and living in the Father's good plan.

I remember an elderly gentleman at a parish mission who asked to speak with me privately after a talk. He wanted to share with me, with a fiery yet peaceful passion, his desire to tell everyone about the prayer of giving God permission. He said that

after 50 years of service in the Charismatic Renewal and other ministries in the Church, what he had learned above all was the importance of the prayer of surrender, of abandonment, of simply giving God permission to do whatever he wants to do with us. With tears in his eyes, he imagined how different the Church would be if we all would pray **“Jesus, I give you permission to do whatever you want with me.”** I assured him he wasn't alone in this, since St. (Mother) Teresa and many other saints had prayed in a similar way.

The prayer of abandonment acknowledges our poverty and helps us to grow in detachment from our own will. It usually brings us the Lord's peace as well. The well-known "Serenity Prayer" popularized by Alcoholics Anonymous, which begins with "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change...," might more accurately be changed to say "God grant me serenity *by accepting* the things I cannot change," since serenity is more of an effect than a cause (but we will accept with serenity that we don't need to change that prayer!)

One time at a Bible study at a homeless shelter during the Christmas season, I asked some of the guests if they had thought about what they could give to Jesus as a birthday gift. Someone offered to give up smoking. Another resolved to stop swearing. One man, who hadn't spoken until then, said just two words – “My will.”

With some amazement at his response, I asked him if he could explain what he meant. He then shared a beautiful testimony. He had just gotten out of prison, and said that he was there again because of an anger problem that had frequently gotten him into trouble. Many times he had told the Lord that he was going to change and keep himself in control. But this time another prisoner gave him some sound spiritual advice. He suggested that rather than telling God what he was going to do better, he should ask the Lord to take control over his life and surrender his entire will to Him. He started to do so and began to

experience a new peace. That interior peace remained even when he was put to the test by some situations that previously would have caused him to respond violently. So he was gratefully continuing to hand over his will to the Lord.

The prayer of surrender sometimes means surrendering our intellect to the Lord as well as our will. With a small shrug of the shoulders, the body language of raised hands also signifies "I don't know" or "I don't know what to do about it." It seems characteristic of Jewish spirituality to ask questions of God; this may be a reason why they often lifted up their hands in prayer! We are reminded by St. Paul that we don't know how to pray as we ought, so we need the help of the Holy Spirit. It is amazing that we are not even able to say the simple word "Daddy" ("Abba") to God without the help of the Holy Spirit, but our experience tells us it is true. We could pronounce it, but not really *pray* it, in spirit and in truth, without the help of the Holy Spirit. We can't reach up to Him by our knowledge, so our open arms are saying to Him, "Pick me up please!" like a little child gesturing without words to his or her mother or father.

In this sense, our raised hands remind us we are standing before a Divine Mystery that will never fit into our limited little minds. Pope Leo the Great, who wrote the great tome about the relation of Jesus' divinity with His humanity, gave a beautiful example of what it means to surrender our intellect. While preaching about the mystery of the Incarnation, he said, "Since we cannot adequately put into words the greatness of this mystery, let us at least feel how good it is to be thus defeated!"

When the Pharisees ask Jesus for a sign from Heaven in Mark 8, Jesus responds with a profound sigh and asks, "Why does this generation ask for a sign?" I imagine Him with that gesture of raised open hands, because His profound sigh then sounds like a prefigurement of Calvary, when He handed over His spirit with a profound sigh. Then in Mark 9 he cries out, "O unbelieving generation, how long must I remain with you? How long must I

endure you?" I imagine Him raising his hands in this gesture both to them and to the Father, signifying in unspoken words, "What else could I do so that these people would believe in me?"

The raising of outstretched hands is also a sign of praising God. This is clear throughout the Old Testament, especially in the psalms. It is the natural gesture of adoration and of offering a sacrifice of praise. One could be standing before the Lord in silence and continue praising Him from the heart simply by this gesture. There is an added dimension of our poverty when we consider that we are lifting wounded hands up to the Lord.

For Christians this posture, even when it is only an interior posture, is a participation in the praise and thanksgiving of Jesus to the Father, especially during the liturgy. This is the usual posture of the priest praying the Mass. Think of the familiar, ancient responses of the Mass; "The Lord be with you." "—And with your Spirit." "Lift up your hearts." "—We have lifted them up to the Lord." Here in Honduras I often see people naturally raising their hands as they say, "we have lifted them up to the Lord." Do we realize why the priest first says the "Lord be with you?" Isn't it so that it may be the Lord Jesus praising the Father within us and lifting up our hearts in a way that goes beyond us?

We can think of St. Francis praying on La Verna with his arms and hands lifted up in a similar way praying "O Lord, Who art Thou, and who am I?" When Br. Leo asked him about it, Francis explained that he was contemplating the Lord's majesty and his own unworthiness to speak with Him. St. Bonaventure writes that St. Francis was in the "highest poverty" on La Verna when he was praying this way. That is worth pondering. ("Who art Thou, and who am I?" is also, practically speaking, a helpful phrase when we don't know how to begin our prayer.)

The prayer of praise thus gives us a right perspective. Adoration is probably the best way to grow in real humility. There is a well-known prayer of Cardinal De Valle, called "The Litany of

Humility.” It is a helpful prayer to recognize and renounce our desires to be praised or preferred, as well as our fears of being rejected or forgotten. It is helpful, but I would dare to say it is only part A of the path toward humility. Part B is forgetting about ourselves in simple adoration of God.

This reminds me of one of the most difficult and darkest moments of my life. At our friary in London we used to run an emergency night shelter, taking turns with other churches in the area. Many of the guests came in drunk or high on drugs. One evening a friendly young man named Danny Haggis came in drunk and then after dinner went into a shower stall and injected himself with heroin. By the time another guest discovered him, he had stopped breathing and was already turning blue. We called the British version of “911.” While the paramedics were on their way they gave me instructions over the phone on how to do CPR. I did my best but was unable to save his life, nor could the paramedics when they arrived. Since I was in charge, I felt responsible for this failure. One of the other guests that night even told me that it was my fault!

The next evening I was scheduled to preach at a charismatic prayer group on the other side of London. It was the last thing I felt like doing. That evening, as the people around me began to praise God, I was more ministered to than ministering. As they lifted up their hands in praise, the Lord interiorly “lifted me up, turned me around, and set my feet on higher ground” (as one song puts it), standing secure on His goodness and not my own.

When we ponder our own wounded hands raised in prayer, we realize our inability to grasp God in any way. We cannot demand feelings of consolation from Him. Sometimes we desire to pray, sometimes we don’t. Sometimes we are alert, sometimes we are tired, and often we are distracted. We can prepare for prayer in a way that makes it easier for us to listen to the Lord, but we can’t force Him to reveal Himself to us. If we

seek self-gratification or consolation in prayer, we may be grasping for ourselves rather than freely giving Him our praise. In times of desolation, we may unite ourselves interiorly with Jesus' open arms on the cross praying the first line of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He does greatly console us in prayer, but even more so when we come before Him with sincere praise and a humble attitude, when we seek to console Him more than ourselves. As Mother Teresa pointed out, the thirst in our soul is already a means of union with the Lord Jesus, who expressed His thirst for our love on the Cross.

How often we hear the complaint, "God doesn't listen to my prayers!" The Catechism of the Catholic Church wisely notes that we aren't so concerned that He doesn't hear our prayers of thanksgiving or praise, just that He doesn't give me what I want! (CCC# 2735). Again, an open, wounded hand represents the confidence of children of the Father who are open to receive His gifts, but realize that they are beyond our reach to grab. Have you ever seen a little child standing with his or her hands open and stretched out, hoping to receive something that he or she can't reach, like a cookie on the counter? That is us before the Father. Sometimes the child says "Gimme! Gimme!" However, the parent is in a better position to discern how and when and what to give.

Often we are asking favors for others more than for ourselves, which is a step in the right direction of non-grasping hands. This intercession requires a similar trust in the Lord's goodness, as we place our loved ones and all of our concerns into His providential hands. Faithful intercessors are like the roots of the tree that first take in the water of grace, but are willing to remain hidden and pass it on so that the fruits develop in God's perfect timing.

Shortly after St. Francis received the stigmata on La Verna, he wrote some praises of God on a parchment, which he then gave to Br. Leo. It is a helpful example of how praise lifts us up to God and helps us to forget about ourselves. Here is part of his

prayer to help us lift up our eyes and our wounded hands to the Lord:

You are holy, Lord, the only God, and Your deeds are wonderful.

You are strong. You are great. You are the Most High.

You are Almighty.

You, Holy Father are King of heaven and earth.

You are Three and One, Lord God, all Good.

You are Good, all Good, supreme Good, Lord God, living and true.

You are love. You are wisdom. You are humility. You are endurance.

You are rest. You are peace. You are joy and gladness.

You are justice and moderation. You are all our riches, and You suffice for us.

You are beauty. You are gentleness. You are our protector.

You are our guardian and defender.

You are our courage. You are our charity and our hope.

You are our faith, our great consolation.

You are our eternal life, Great and Wonderful Lord, God Almighty, Merciful Savior. Amen.

Adorable Feet, Wounded on the Road

As soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing (Joshua 3:15-16)

He parted the heavens and came down; thick darkness was under His feet. (Ps 18:9)

Turning now to the feet of Christ, what might they tell us about the lived experience of His Incarnation? Let us first of all adore those glorious feet in our hearts, for they were the means by which God walked on earth. They were infinitely more powerful than the feet of the priests that stopped the flow of waters as they carried the ark into the promised land, symbolizing God's strength protecting His people; the feet of Jesus even walked over the waters, symbolizing His victory over death. They are divine feet that were free to go anywhere, but limited themselves to a small province of the earth. John the Baptist understood correctly that he wasn't even worthy to untie the sandal straps of those Divine feet. Yet those feet of the Almighty One who has His throne in Heaven and has the earth as His footstool (Is 66:1) came not demanding submission, but gently announcing peace.

Isaiah correctly prophesied, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of Him who brings good news..." (52:7), more worthy than he could have imagined. If you look carefully at the Gospel of St. Luke, you can see how concretely Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled. At the end of chapter seven, we read about the woman "known as a sinner" who was the instrument of showing the loving adoration that was truly, rightly and justly due to those feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee. Notice how immediately after she reverently washes and anoints His feet, St.

Luke tells us that Jesus went through the villages "proclaiming and bringing the Good News of the kingdom of God" (8:1).

Similarly, the contemplative Mary of Bethany sat at the Lord's feet (Lk 10:39), fell at His feet (Jn 11:32), and perfumed His feet, wiping them with her hair (Jn12:3). There are many pictures and statues of St. Francis adoring and embracing the feet of Christ on the cross. No doubt, he lovingly adored the feet of Christ in his heart with a similar devotion as the "sinful woman" in Luke 7, and others in the gospel who prostrated themselves at Jesus' feet.

The Lord Jesus amazingly placed Himself at the feet of the Apostles when He washed their feet, humbling Himself and "taking the form of a servant" (Phil 2). He who rides on the clouds deserves even more reverence for His example of showing reverence to His disciples. (Plus He probably insisted on washing St. Peter's feet because He knew that "Rocky" would so often have "his foot in his mouth!"). St. Francis also exhorted his friars in positions of authority to reverence their brothers by having the disposition to wash their feet.

Yet these precious feet of Christ were wounded for us, not only on the Cross, but throughout his life. On the one foot, we can see how they were wounded while announcing that very Gospel of peace. They were wounded by apostolic fatigue. For example, we find the Lord tired and thirsty at Jacob's well, during one of his many preaching journeys (John 4). He and his disciples were often so pressed in by the crowds that there was no time even to eat and His family thought that He was "out of His mind" when they saw this (Mk 3:20 & 6:31). When He was at Capernaum, being comfortably taken care of by Simon's mother-in-law, with a steady crowd coming to be healed, it appears that He was tempted to remain and set up shop, so to speak. Perhaps He thought about having a "healing clinic" with regular hours. Instead He sets out on the road again, having listened to the Father in the early morning hours, reminded of the purpose for which He was sent (Lk 4:42-43).

More significant was the wound of rejection and persecution that He received so frequently while preaching the Good News of salvation. The "better it got" in terms of revealing the fullness of the Father's perfect plan, the worse it became for Him as far as persecution and threats. When He tells the assembly in Nazareth that Isaiah's messianic prophecy was being fulfilled in their hearing, they respond by trying to throw him over a cliff! (Lk 4:16ff) When he tries to reveal to the Jewish authorities His oneness with the Father, they accuse him of having a demon and then try to stone Him (Jn 8: 52 & 59). Frequently His divine teaching was met by teachers of the Law who tried to trap Him or trick Him by their questions.

Those who are sent out on mission by obedience to the Lord have many opportunities to be conformed to the wounded feet of Christ. They often experience apostolic fatigue – physically and emotionally. For example, you may have seen a famous photo of Mother Teresa's feet, showing how worn out they were from her labors of love. Evangelization often does not conform to office hours, and much less does crisis intervention. A disciple can become tired and overwhelmed simply by thinking about all of the people who need to hear the Gospel, and unsure where to begin. 2000 years after Jesus first said it, we still experience the reality that the harvest is plenty but the laborers are few (Mt 9:37).

Sometimes, like Him, we must experience rejection and persecution for sharing the faith we have been given. Preaching the Gospel of life with great kindness can land one in jail, as it has at times with some of our friars. Christians who wear a cross or religious who wear a habit may receive nasty remarks from strangers or even from friends. Many sincere disciples experience a mild yet painful misunderstanding and rejection from their families and friends. Again, our Savior walked that path before us in His home town of Nazareth.

He warned his disciples that they would encounter similar rejection when He sent them out on mission. If they called the master of the house “Beelzebub,” how much more his disciples? (cf Mt 10:25). How often has the Church been accused, particularly in the moral battles of our time, of being “oppressive” for proclaiming the truth that sets us free? Jesus promises his disciples that the world will hate them because they don’t belong to it. The Gospel doesn’t fit into the platform of any political party, and therefore is perceived as a threat. In some sense it is, because the light of truth shines in the darkness of error, and the darkness cannot overcome it for long. Indeed the Gospel, and any Christian who really lives by it, will necessarily afflict the comfortable while comforting the afflicted.

At the same time, we often experience the blessedness and the surprising joy that the Lord speaks of for those who are persecuted for His sake (Mt 5:11-12). For example, when the opening of our friary in East London was welcomed by eggs and rocks being thrown at us from local youth, we were given the grace to rejoice in it. Sometimes those little persecutions even become “invitations” to approach someone who otherwise may never have anyone share the faith with them!

According to a certain Rabbi Finkel who taught at Seton Hall University in New Jersey, even the “shaking of dust” from one’s feet that Jesus’ speaks of could be interpreted in a hopeful way. The good Jewish professor pointed out that shaking the dust from one’s feet is what Jews (and others) usually do when entering a holy place. That was the custom before entering the Temple. Another way of looking at this is that the disciples were entering a holy place when they experienced rejection for preaching the Gospel. Similarly, we want to shake off any dust of resentment and ask the Lord to bathe our feet in His mercy, so that our wounded feet don’t become infected. We want to remember that those wounds (but not the dust!) remained on the feet of Jesus’ glorified body, signifying the triumph of His mercy

and patience that was already at work during His public ministry.

We trust that the Good News that we are sharing is really what everyone is thirsting for, whether they know it or not. We experienced this reality at a large pro-life rally outside of an abortion site in Buffalo many years ago. There was a huge crowd of pro-abortion activists there, shouting angry and blasphemous chants at us right in front of our faces on the sidewalk as we were praying. When some of us finished praying the Rosary and Divine Mercy chaplet, I pulled out a little pocket New Testament and two of us starting chanting the Sermon on the Mount, beginning with the Beatitudes (Mt 5). The crowd in front of us grew quiet, and after we finished one page a few of them asked if we would continue – they wanted to hear some more! The Word that we carry with our little wounded feet is indeed the Word of Life that the world interiorly longs for, even as it verbally rejects it.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, make my feet carriers of Your peace, Your Gospel of peace.

Where there is doubt, let me bring true faith,

where there is despair, certain hope,

where there is hatred, perfect charity.

*May I carry Your word of life on the roads of the world
and also be carried by You. Amen.*

Wounded Feet, Fastened by Obedience

You fasten my feet in shackles; You keep close watch on all my paths by putting marks on the soles of my feet. (Job 13:27)

My eyes are ever on the Lord, for only He can release my feet from the snare. (Ps 25:15)

And I will glorify the place of my feet. (Is 60:13)

The other wounded foot may stand for all of the other ways that our Savior practiced abandonment to the Father's will during his earthly life, being fastened to the Cross of obedience. For example, He was tempted in the desert to follow an easier and more "reasonable" way of being the Messiah, to make a big impression in Jerusalem. Earlier in His life, as a 12-year-old, He was ready to start teaching in the Temple, but instead practiced obedience to His Father by being obedient to Mary and Joseph and heading back to the hidden life of Nazareth. All of these ways of practicing obedience were one life-long movement of obedience that would culminate in being obedient even unto death, death on a Cross. In a very surprising line of Scripture, we are told that Christ even "learned obedience by what He suffered" (Heb. 5:8). Mysteriously, the Son of Man humanly grew in obedience.

So if the one foot represents being sent out on mission by obedience, the other foot may represent accepting the obedience to the will of God by staying in a place that is uncomfortable, or accepting a situation that is beyond our control. Our Lord prophesied to St. Peter that he would be fastened to a cross in his old age, and it literally came to pass. (cf Jn 21:18-19). For most of us, that cross in our later years is more likely to be a hospital bed or a wheelchair.

The venerable Cardinal Francis-Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, of Vietnam, experienced a powerful insight into this when he was imprisoned for 11 years. He was tempted by discouragement because his life as a bishop was being “wasted” in prison. Then he realized deeply that our Lord did more for the world in those few hours that He was fastened to the Cross, unable to go anywhere, than He did during His entire public ministry. As the Vietnamese bishop began to unite his imprisonment more intentionally with the offering of Christ, he began to see the triumph of the cross take place in the conversion of other prisoners and even of the guards.

A number of noteworthy saints experienced a grace of conversion by being fastened to a sick bed for a time. St. Paul was blinded on the road to Damascus, so that he would begin to see in a new way by faith in the Lord Jesus. St. Francis of Assisi was sick in bed for about a year in his early twenties, which helped him to re-evaluate what he should do with his life. St. Ignatius of Loyola began to discern the Spirit of the Lord when his leg was injured in battle and he was fastened to the cross of a sickbed as well. This way of participating in the Lord’s passion taught them to offer themselves trustingly to the Lord, and prepared them for yet greater offerings.

It is good to remind people in hospitals and nursing homes that they are the most powerful and effective people in the Church. It is true. Occasionally I have been able to see the connection of a sick person’s offering with a grace given to others, although it usually remains unseen. I recall, for example, a holy woman in France who had been bed-ridden for 25 years. “Marie-Ange” indeed had an angelic countenance as she told me how good God was to her, lying there in her bed, looking at the crucifix on the wall facing her. She lived in the wing of a large house that had recently become home to a group of devout young people. These young people were the core members of a prayer group in Paris. They had begun the group about six months prior to our

visit, and in that short time it had grown from about a dozen to about a thousand young people at their meetings. The members of this group unanimously attributed its growth to the intercession of their angelic Marie.

Similarly, in our neighborhood in Comayagua, Honduras, there is a saintly elderly prayer warrior named Doña Lucila. She is mostly blind, very poor, and has been homebound for over eight years because of illness and frailty. Many of our friars who have visited her over the years and observed her singing and giving thanks after receiving Communion are convinced that she is a very close friend of the Lord. She receives us with a wide-hearted hospitality in her little one room house where she lives with three of her daughters. It is clear that she lives to intercede for others, as she sits day and night in front of a cinder block wall filled with more holy images than a Byzantine sanctuary. In her simple and profound way she said to me, “The wounds of the Lord protect us. They are the source of life for us.”

These witnesses of abandonment to Divine Providence teach us a lesson we must learn again and again. Eventually one learns to expect that when a car breaks down, when the electricity goes out, or even when a pandemic closes down the world, the Lord is intervening in a special working of His providence. For example, not only did the Coronavirus become an opportunity for us to grow in patience and prayer, it also became the occasion to write this book you are reading. Many other Christians were also inspired to do new and creative works for the Lord during the pandemic.

There are countless examples among the saints of the fruitfulness of trusting obedience to the Lord. A recent example is Pope St. John Paul II, who as a seminarian began to feel called to be a Carmelite friar. The young Karol Wojtyla prayed a lot about it, waited to make sure it was a consistent desire, and then asked his bishop for permission to transfer to the Carmelites. His bishop said no. After he was ordained as a diocesan priest, the desire still

hadn't gone away. He spoke to the Carmelite prior and together they went to talk with his bishop. Fr. Wojtyla and the prior spoke about how long and carefully and prayerfully they had discerned this sense that God was calling him to the Carmelites. Still the bishop said no. (Thanks be to God!)

Humanly speaking, as someone who is familiar with vocational discernment, I would say the bishop made a mistake, and that he should have listened to Fr. Wojtyla and the prior. However, the Lord had something more important in mind for him, even if that bishop didn't understand what that would be. Surely the trial of being an obedient son of the Church made John Paul II a better spiritual father, a better pope. The struggle to be a trusting sheep made him a better shepherd of the universal Church.

In the Christian life of obedience, whether in being sent or in staying put, we have ample opportunities to grow in confidence in the Father's good plan for us and in the victory of Christ through the Paschal Mystery. We may still have to contend with the wound of our rebellious nature that cries out "I don't want to!" or "I know better." Naturally, as we get older it becomes more difficult to be obedient to someone younger than us, or to keep following the same old practices, or perhaps the uncomfortably new practices, of a community. After being in a position of responsibility, and knowing one's own limitations, it may be more difficult for someone to have a simple faith-filled view of obedience. All of this is to say that we too can grow and learn a deeper obedience through our various sufferings.

Growing in obedience surprisingly means growing in freedom. This is greatly misunderstood in our day, when most voices in the world tell us that freedom is doing whatever we feel like doing. The prolonged effect of that vision of freedom is self-destruction. For example, some literally fight for the right to destroy themselves by assisted suicide in the name of freedom. For others it may be through addiction to the drug of their choice.

Still others will destroy innocent human life in the womb in the name of freedom. History shows repeatedly how this idea of “freedom” brings about the self-destruction of a society. What will happen if the whole world, interconnected as never before in history, falls into this same misconception of freedom? We may soon find out.

On the other hand (or foot), obedience to the Lord brings us to a real fullness of freedom and fullness of life. Interior freedom is essentially freedom from selfishness. Recognizing a higher authority, a divine authority, frees us from the anxiety of thinking that we have to figure everything out for ourselves, while knowing deep-down that we really can't. The freedom that comes from obedience helps us to live peacefully in the present moment.

Obedience frees us from our pride, which gets in the way of healthy relationships. As St. Benedict of Nursia said, we are as humble as we are obedient and as obedient as we are humble. Voluntary obedience, like humility, helps to free us from some of our overly-high defense mechanisms, so that we are more free to love others. What we are speaking of is really not a “blind obedience,” but rather an obedience that sees more clearly and deeply by the light of faith and reason together, and then freely responds, like Our Lady, “let it be done unto me according to Thy word.”

Our growth in obedience comes from experiences of trusting in the Lord, when things don't go as we planned or wanted, and seeing them turn out better than our plan. Our trust in His providence usually grows by having more memories of the times that the Lord brought about a good outcome from something apparently not good to us. Our joy increases as we experience more often how the Lord carries out His gracious will through human error and weakness. Again it brings us back to the mystery of Calvary, how being obedient to a cruel death brought about the freedom of all of God's children for all time, and how the feet of our Savior trampled over death by His death.

Let us pray for that grace:

*Lord Jesus, may You be glorified for Your humble obedience.
I offer with You, O Lord, every situation where I feel stuck
or fastened immobile to the cross.*

*I trust that You will bring me to a deeper freedom by means of
that cross.*

*Heavenly Father, I believe that You work all things to the good for
those who love You. I give You permission to do whatever You
want to do with me.*

*Holy Spirit, command me to do Your holy will today and every day
of my life. Amen.*

The Wounded Side That Reveals His Heart

The Lord be with you. - And with your spirit.

Lift up your hearts. - We have lifted them up to the Lord.

(The Roman Liturgy)

Rabbi Abraham Heschel, in his powerful book on the prophets, asks in the beginning, “what manner of man is the prophet?” The answer he brings us to is that the prophet is someone who “sympathizes with the Divine pathos,” that is, someone who feels what God feels and then speaks accordingly. A prophet speaks from a silence of his own heart because he is overwhelmed by what God feels toward His people.

It is an amazing grace of the New Covenant that we have personal access to the Heart of Christ and thereby can share in what God feels. By our baptism, which for many of us took place before we were able to utter a word, we were called to share in the prophetic vocation. In an objective way, Christ began to dwell within us and to unite us with His Heart. Then our subjective task became learning how to listen and recognize what He is feeling and saying within us.

Have you ever asked the Lord Jesus how He feels? Or what He feels? It may seem like a strange question to ask Him, in the sense of the great difference that exists between the Creator and the creature. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that “our human words always fall short of the mystery of God” and that “between Creator and creature no similitude can be expressed without implying an even greater dissimilitude” (cf. #’s 42 & 43). Nonetheless, we can ask Him this question because He has a human heart. The flames of fire that we see bursting out in images of the Sacred Heart tell us something of that infinite passion of the Lord, that is so much more intense than what we

feel. We might have days when we feel passionate, but the Heart of Jesus is a divine furnace of love. If it is true that our desires define us more than our actions do, we may ponder with awe the immense desire in the Heart of Christ to share His love with us.

When I asked the Lord Jesus recently how He feels, I believe that He gave me two words in response. One was “thirsty.” That didn’t surprise me very much, because I have often been in chapels of the Missionaries of Charity that have the words “I thirst” next to the crucifix. It may be that His revelation to St. (Mother) Teresa of Kolkata was a response to that question in her heart, “Lord, how do You feel?”

The other word that came to me was “restless.” At first, I thought that maybe I was projecting my own feelings upon the Lord, since I was asking during the lockdown time of the Coronavirus! Then I understood Him to be saying that He was restless until all of us would rest in Him. It is a kind of mirror of what St. Augustine described as his own restlessness. As Jesus invites us to rest in His meek and humble Heart in Mathew 11:30, He also desires to rest in our hearts.

During the Mass, one of the most familiar responses, which goes back to the earliest days of the Church, is the one quoted at the beginning of this chapter. How many of us realize what we are saying there? The priest prays that the Lord be with the participants and then asks them to lift up their hearts. The Church realizes that we can only lift up our hearts in prayer if the Lord is with us, in us, in our hearts. We need to have His Heart in order to pray in a worthy way to the Father.

Volumes have been written about the Sacred Heart of Jesus, because everything that matters is contained there, and no amount of words could contain it. There is a universal appeal of the Sacred Heart. For example, I recall a tapestry of the Sacred Heart in the sanctuary of a little storefront Baptist church that used to be near our friary in the Bronx. Who could resist the

invitation to abide in a Heart so meek and lowly?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church calls the human heart our “hidden center... deeper than all of our psychic drives” (#2563). In a similar way, we may say that the wounded Heart of the Bridegroom is the hidden center of the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery, of the marriage of Divinity and humanity. It is the “new wineskin” from which the new wine of His Precious Blood and the Living Waters of the Holy Spirit are given to us.

St. Bonaventure said that we must enter through the wound of His side if we are to enter into the Heart of Christ Himself. We might take this to mean that one cannot enter into the Sacred Heart without seeking to enter into or understand the interior suffering of our Savior. A heart is a popular symbol of love, but we don’t want to reduce the love of God to a superficial sticker. We need to meditate on what pierced Him if we really want to begin to understand His love.

We have already considered the wound of rejection that Jesus experienced as He healed others and shared the Gospel of salvation with them. There is still more to ponder as we enter into his Sacred Heart. Like the other wounds, the wound in the pure Heart of Christ was life-long, not only at Calvary. It is hard for us to know exactly what the emotional life of a sinless man is like, but certainly the real blood, sweat and tears of His Heart during His public ministry are attested to in the Gospels. His Heart was “moved with pity.” At another time He was “deeply troubled.” He was angry. He wept. During His agony He sweated blood. He had so much love to give and so few who were able to receive it.

He must have experienced a desolation or loneliness in His human Heart because of His unique place in the history of the world. Nobody else ever was or will be both true God and true man. Who could understand or empathize with Him? The only event that we hear of from His childhood reveals to us that even

his very holy parents didn't (yet) understand Who He was (Luke 2:50).

At the Last Supper He called His disciples his friends. At the same time, He made known His disappointment to Philip that He had been with them for so long and they still didn't understand Him. However, He continued to speak to them about His great love for them and of the Father's love, and he prayed that they would remain in His love. Just a few hours later, they all abandoned Him. "Thus even my friend, who ate my bread, has turned against me" (Psalm 41).

At the same time, mysteriously He was never truly alone, since He was one with the Father. He says this plainly in John 16:32. We don't want to reduce the experience of the Lord into our own little hearts. There was and is an infinite fountain of mercy and living water in the Heart of Christ, just waiting to be poured out for all those who are thirsting for love (cf Jn 7:37ff). The wounds of His Heart are infinitely bigger than ours but they also contain the transforming power of an infinite love.

Thomas the apostle is famous for his doubt. If we read between the lines a bit, it looks like he not only had an intellectual doubt, but a doubting heart, a troubled, wounded heart. He had isolated himself from the other apostles. We aren't told why he wasn't there, but his stubborn attitude sounds more like someone with a broken heart, than a simple agnostic attitude (if that is ever really simple). He was identified by a nickname of "Didymus" (the twin), but we don't hear anything about his twin. Surely we would have heard about him if he was a disciple. Many other apostles came in with brothers or friends, but Thomas enters the scene on his own.

Doubting Thomas was healed of his doubting heart as he put his doubts into the hands and side of the Divine wounded Healer. Our Lord didn't tell Thomas to check out His hands and feet but rather His hands and His side. When he touches the

reality of the wounded Heart of Christ, Thomas becomes a wounded healer himself. The Fathers of the Church said that because of his doubt he did more for the faith of the Church than did the other apostles.

Each reader has a unique history of a wounded heart to unite with the Sacred Heart. Most likely everyone in every vocation will experience loneliness at some time. Many try to escape from it through drugs, alcohol, or promiscuity; others by excessive social media, video games, television, or other unhealthy habits. Very devout Christians may try unconsciously to ignore it by activism. The better option is to find our place within the Heart of Christ and let Him transform the sores of life into sources of healing. Those wounds may become the means of a more personal and real encounter with the Savior. Suffering opens up deeper places of the heart, as countless Christians have learned throughout the ages.

Uniting our heart with the Heart of Christ is not only a consolation for us but, we may even dare to say, a consolation for Him. Because of the timelessness of His Heart we can say, "Lord Jesus, I want to be with You in the desert; I want to be with You at Gethsemane; I want to be with you at Calvary; and at all of the places where You felt alone, abandoned or misunderstood." Various saints, such as St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein), have written about how Jesus was in fact consoled during His passion, knowing that there would be Christians in the future who would keep vigil and desire to be with Him during that time in a spiritually timeless way.

The grace of unity with His Heart isn't just for rare mystics in monasteries. I remember a very simple man named Joshua, who was a guest at our St. Anthony Shelter in the Bronx, who received this grace. In his simple way he once said to me, "Gee, that sure is strange. Why is it that when I'm crying Jesus is crying with me, and when He is crying, I'm crying with Him?" It's not surprising that He tends to reveal His humble Heart to those who

approach Him more as children than to the wise and clever, just like His Heavenly Father (cf Mt 11:25-27). One result of His wounded Heart is that He is close to broken hearts. He understands them from the inside, from His human experience, as well as His divine wisdom. He pours out of His wounded Heart the grace, mercy and consolation that every other heart desires, because the victory of His love is greater than every human tragedy.

More recent biographers of St. Francis of Assisi tend to focus on and speak more directly of the experience of loneliness that he went through. Earlier sources alluded to it, but usually in a more reserved hagiographical way. While Francis saw himself as a brother to all and rejoiced that the Lord gave him brothers, he also experienced the profound heartache of his brothers turning away from him. He felt betrayed at their rejection of the way of life the Lord had entrusted to him. Some of his brothers were in fact embarrassed by his simple ways as their founder.

In 1224, when St. Francis was praying to share in the Lord's cross and in the love that motivated Him to embrace that cross, he was already sharing profoundly and existentially in the wounded Heart of Christ. His own experience of rejection, along with his prayer, is a likely reason why the Lord saw fit to make him the first stigmatist. He didn't hang on to a victim identity. His heart expanded in love of God and neighbor through His suffering with Christ. His deeper participation in the wounds of Christ mysteriously increased his joy and peace and many other fruits of the Holy Spirit as well.

We have a sense of the desires in the heart of Francis from his prayer called the "Absorbeat:"

*Lord, may the strength of Your love, fiery and sweet,
remove from my soul everything less than Heaven,
so that I may die for love of Your love,
since You deigned to die for love of my love.*

The Purity of His Wounded Heart

"Love is not loved!" - St. Francis of Assisi

"Create in me a clean heart, O God." (Psalm 51:10)

It would be good for us to consider the wounded Heart of Christ in relation to chastity. Chastity is much more than sexual abstinence and a discipline of the body. It refers to our whole manner of loving others with the love of Christ. He indicates that chastity is particularly a matter of the heart when He speaks of its opposite, adultery, committed in one's heart (Mt 5:28).

How did our Savior live chastity? The Gospel writers didn't seem specifically interested in that question. John the Baptist points to Him as the Bridegroom (Jn 3:29) and Jesus uses that term for Himself as well (Lk 5:34-35). St. Paul explains further what that means in Ephesians 5 when he talks about Christ giving Himself completely to His bride, the Church. These are enough to squelch the popular theories of some modern gnostic writers that Jesus had a normal wife. They also open us to the profoundly personal depth of His love for every soul.

Some years ago, a priest-friend was "interviewing" his sister's fiancée. The priest asked him if he was going to love his sister like Jesus loved the Church. The nervous young man, from Brooklyn, gave an unimpressive response of a simple "Yeah." When he was asked further if he understood what that means, he gave the golden response, "Yeah, I'd give my life for her."

A heart that is willingly wounded with Jesus is also a pure heart, a purified heart. It is purified from a self-seeking love. A pure heart leads to pure speech, since "it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks" (Luke 6:41). A pure heart leads to a pure vision, since "the pure of heart shall see God." In

fact, Br. Giles, an early companion of St. Francis, said, "keeping all of one's senses for God's favors is what I call chastity," or purity of heart.

Jesus' body and soul were in complete unity, as was His will, with the Father, so He was completely chaste. What about temptations? Since He was conceived by the Holy Spirit in His sinless mother, theologians tell us He was without concupiscence, the tendency of the flesh toward sin. It would be a mistake to presume that He saw through the same tainted lens as the rest of us. He was totally unique in the depth of His freedom to love others.

Nonetheless, the world around Him was full of sin. Since we read in Hebrews 5:8 that He mysteriously, humanly, learned obedience by what He suffered, would it be beneath His dignity to think that he humanly grew in chastity by having to respond to the sins of others? We know that at the age of twelve He was already able to converse with the teachers in the Temple with an amazing wisdom. Most likely, He also found Himself among a "council" of other twelve-year-old boys from Nazareth who engaged in lewd conversations, and perhaps mocked Him for His purity of customs, and He would have responded to them with a wisdom necessary for that situation. Although the norms of His time called for more social distance between men and women than today's world (until the Coronavirus!), it seems probable that a teenage maiden or two among his neighbors in those hidden years would have been flirtatious toward Him, and that He would have had to respond with truth and kindness, with clarity and charity.

We are told that Jesus "grew in wisdom and grace" (Lk 2:52). That little line draws us humbly into the vast mystery of the Incarnation that remains beyond the horizon of our understanding. Growth in chastity wouldn't mean He was ever unchaste, just as growth in obedience doesn't mean He was ever disobedient. Growth in this sense might have included humanly

learning how to communicate the fullness of God's pure love to others. It probably included offering small sacrifices that humanly prepared Him to ultimately give His life on the Cross for His bride, the Church, and for every human soul.

Other authors have written at length about His freedom in the way He acted with women, reflecting, for example, on his dialogue with the Samaritan woman in John 4. His words to Mary Magdalene on Easter Sunday, "Don't cling to me for I haven't yet ascended to the Father" are sometimes interpreted in very mystical ways. One could also interpret those words in a more lighthearted way, something like, "Let go of me Mary, or I won't be able to ascend to the Father!" In any case, He was clear about not allowing anyone to possess Him in an exclusive way, while having a heart truly open to each individual person.

Although we believe that the sinless God-man didn't struggle with concupiscence in His flesh as we do, the Scriptures are clear that He was tempted by the Enemy in other ways. He was tempted to use His power to satisfy His physical hunger by turning stones into bread. This approximates at least the effect of concupiscence, seeking to satisfy our sense appetites by using God's gift of the body in a way that contradicts His good plan for us.

The Lord's response to the enemy was that we live more fully by listening to every word that comes from the mouth of God than we do by filling ourselves with bread. His food was to do the will of the Father (Jn 4:34). There is a lesson here that holds true in our battle with concupiscence. When we are listening to the Father's voice, the temptations of the enemy are heard for what they are - false promises of happiness that actually lead to sadness. Jesus made it very clear to His disciples that concupiscence has serious consequences for them when He said it would be better to remove one's eyes or hands than to sin with them (Mt 5:30). To say it more simply, when we persevere in prayer, in dialogue with the Lord, temptations of the flesh usually

lose their force. St. Paul shares his struggle with the flesh in Romans 7 and then the victory he finds through the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit of Truth, our Divine lawyer, who defends us from all of the various lies of the Accuser.

Another practical help in the battle with the flesh is remembering the words of the Good Shepherd, that he lays down His life for the sheep. If chastity or marital faithfulness is merely seen as a kind of moral perfection or as keeping a promise, the motive may not be strong enough to persevere. When we decide to offer abstinence, or faithfulness in marriage, for others, for specific people who are dear to us, the motive is stronger. The motive is generosity, laying down our lives for others. It is a kind of fasting to be offered for specific people or situations, and it always bears spiritual fruit.

For priests and religious who seek to follow the Lord's example of celibacy and chastity, His promise of the hundredfold, that He will never be outdone in generosity, is especially evident. He has given us a huge family in the Church! Our faithful commitment to chastity is complementary to that of married couples, who carry their own wounds and crosses with Christ and encourage us by their example to be generous.

I recall the example of a couple sharing their testimony during a meeting about Natural Family Planning during a parish mission. Some of the participants were talking about how difficult it was to practice abstinence during those times when the wife was most fertile. One couple acknowledged that difficulty, but added that they offered that struggle to the Lord for priests and religious who practice abstinence their whole lives for them. I would never have voiced that request, but I was so grateful for their testimony. I am certain that the Lord pours out His grace in abundance when His disciples, lay or ordained or religious, offer their struggles with chastity for other people.

Every spouse and parent may find unity with the wounded

Heart of Christ during those times when family life becomes lonely, when a spouse doesn't understand, when children are ungrateful or rebellious. Yet as all Christians seek to "live no longer I, but Christ living within me" (cf Gal 2:20) we are to be united with the sentiments of Christ, with His mind and heart, to see what He sees and feel what He feels as He looks upon His children, whether they are natural or spiritual children. "Lift up your hearts," is a daily invitation for the home, not only for the Mass!

Our hearts are not diminished by consecrated chastity, nor by a faithful married life; rather, they are expanded with the overflowing love of Christ. As the document *Fraternal Life in Community* tells us, "The love of Christ poured into our hearts urges us to love our brothers and sisters even to the point of taking on their weaknesses, problems, and difficulties" (#21). It is a wounded love that more readily understands those weaknesses and difficulties.

Consider another example from the life of St. Francis. When someone was speaking about him as a living saint, his response was "I could still have children." Not only do we learn from this response a healthy realism, but also a healthy transparency. Far from repression, he was aware of and able to share this normal struggle and in that way became even more free. That kind of honesty, first of all with ourselves and then with a spiritual director or brother or sister in the Lord, has brought the Lord's light and grace into many shadowy situations.

Let us pray:

*Lord Jesus, please place all of the desires of Your Heart into my heart. Then I will be offering Your Heart back to You, O Lord.
I can only truly and fully love others if I have Your Heart.
Lord Jesus, please give me Your Heart and never take it back.*

The Stigmata and the Eucharist

"This is my Body, given up for you." "This is my blood, poured out for you."

The next time you are adoring the Lord in the Eucharist (or perhaps the first time for some readers) look at His wounded hands and feet and heart present in front of you. If at first you don't see them, look again with faith and with the eyes of your heart.

You are looking at the resurrected body of Jesus. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (#645) tells us that the glorified body of Jesus has new properties so that He can be *where* He wants, *when* He wants and *how* He wants. This deduction is based on the evidence of His resurrection appearances in the Gospels. The resurrected body seems to abide by a new kind of physics. (By the way, apparently we will have those same new properties to look forward to, by His grace, for our resurrected bodies as well. Let your imagination be lifted up to Heaven!)

You might hear the words of the hymn *Adoro Te Devote* in your heart: "I am not like Thomas, wounds I cannot see, but I plainly call Thee, Lord and God as he." Whatever appearance Jesus decides to take, those wounds are part of His identity. We can't see and touch those wounds with our senses, but we can with our heart, with the aid of faith. The paschal mystery that the Eucharist continually makes present is the same mystery that His wounds continually proclaim.

Can you see His wounded hands present in the host? His arms are spread wide in a gesture of total openness and vulnerability. We are told that at the Last Supper Jesus loved his disciples "eis telos" in Greek, which may be translated "to the end," or "to the utmost", or "to the extreme" (John 13:1). There

is an extreme risk in this vulnerable generosity.

If you were to think of Jesus playing an “extreme sport,” it would be the Eucharist! One could lightly imagine Him telling His mother Mary of His plan to give us His Body and Blood in the disguise of bread and wine. We might have heard Mary say, "But that sounds so risky - what if You get hurt? What if someone drops You, or leaves You somewhere forgotten, or even steps on You?"

Our Savior would have replied, "But Mother, I have to take the risk. Even if I connect fully with just a few people, if I am received with deep intimacy and communion with even one person, it would be worth it!"

There is a little game with children that is common to various cultures. Someone asks the child, holding his hands with a small space in-between, "Do you love me this much?" Then, as he opens wide his arms, he asks, "Or do you love me THIS much?..." Jesus' arms open wide on the Cross are the same as He comes to us in the Eucharist.

In the first Eucharistic prayer for Reconciliation, the Church poetically prays, "But before his arms were outstretched between Heaven and earth, to become an everlasting sign of your covenant, he desired to eat the Passover with his disciples...." Those outstretched hands and arms are an everlasting sign of the wideness of God's mercy and love, which are to bridge the gap between divinity and humanity.

In the holy Eucharist, Jesus is corporally present in a gesture of extreme humility, again with non-grasping hands. It is a second “kenosis,” an emptying of self, not only taking the form of our nature but also taking the appearance of bread and wine, inanimate objects. He hands Himself over to sinners again, including to sinful priests.

Now let us look at His feet fastened there by obedience.

He is extremely docile and obedient in the Eucharist. Whenever a priest decides to say Mass, Jesus will arrive. Wherever someone decides to move a ciborium or take a host, even to a place of desecration, Jesus will obediently go there without the slightest resistance.

In this second kenosis of the Eucharist, He is obedient not only unto death, but unto ridicule and rejection and indifference even by His disciples and friends. Many of his disciples turned away from Him, as we read in John 6:66, and continue to turn away, because this teaching is so hard to accept.

Perhaps it is more common to recognize the wounded Heart of Christ in the Eucharist. It is the manner in which Jesus lives out His deep thirst to be in communion with us. I have witnessed the deep desire of many a dying person to receive Holy Communion. For example, a man named Alejandro had not eaten anything for weeks because of a stomach cancer. When I raised the Host in front of him and began to say, "Behold the Lamb of God...," Alejandro strained so hard to raise himself from his bed to receive Communion that I thought he would expire from the effort, so I rushed the prayer as fast as I could! However, his deep longing to receive the Body of Christ was almost nothing in comparison with the deep desire of Christ to give Himself to Alejandro, and to each of us.

In the Eucharistic Heart of Christ, we encounter a chaste expression of His love. He gives us His Body, in a faithful, free, and complete nuptial gift to His Church and to the individual soul. Yet there is nothing of the erotic nature of pagan rituals in this memorial of His passion. The host is an extremely modest, simple, and non-threatening way of giving Himself to His bride, the Church.

One way to describe the goal of our spiritual life is to make a Eucharist of our entire life with Christ. From all that was said above, we can see how His whole life expressed a Eucharistic gift

of self – “This is my Body and my Blood given for you” – in many day-to-day ways that all human beings can participate in. In this sense, the one High Priest began to offer Mass from the first moment of His conception. Therefore, every effort of ours, whether physical or more interior, that requires our “blood, sweat and tears,” can be united with the unlimited offering of the Mass.

Another dimension of making a Eucharist of our lives is the practice of thanking God the Father for everything, whether pleasant or not. “What return can I make to the Lord for all the good He has done for me? The chalice of salvation I will raise and I will call upon the Name of the Lord,” (Psalm 116:12-13). The Eucharist is a thanksgiving sacrifice. There are times in life when thanking God requires a real sacrifice from us interiorly, times when we are tempted to complain or even scold the Lord for allowing something so difficult. Those are times when we especially need to interiorly “enter” in the wounds of Christ crucified and allow Him to transform us by His paschal mystery so that we can “exit” with thanksgiving from the wounds of Christ resurrected. That is another way of summarizing the Mass.

This seems to be the most appropriate time to pray the “Anima Christi,” a personally direct plea to Jesus in the Eucharist, from which the title of this book is taken:

Soul of Christ, sanctify me;
Body of Christ, save me;
Blood of Christ, inebriate me;
Water from the side of Christ, wash me;
Passion of Christ, strengthen me;
O good Jesus, hear me;
Within Thy wounds hide me;
Separated from Thee, let me never be;
From the evil one protect me;
At the hour of my death, call me;
And let me come unto Thee
That with Thy saints, I may praise Thee,
forever and ever. Amen.

The Stigmata Revealing the Father

Philip said, "Lord show us the Father and that will be enough for us." Jesus answered, "... Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say show us the Father? Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?" (John 14: 8-10)

In the first chapter we considered that when Jesus showed his wounds to His disciples and said "It is I myself," it was as if He was saying "This is how to identify Me." Perhaps it would be better to say that they speak of His deepest identity as the Son of Man, as our Redeemer, as the Word Incarnate. The stigmata symbolically summarize all of His earthly life. He makes it clear, however, especially in the Gospel of St. John, that His deepest identity is the eternal Son of the Father.

This raises a question: Do those sacred wounds tell us something about the Father? When Jesus tells us to look at His feet and hands and side, is He also helping us to know the Father better, since he tells us "whoever has seen me has seen the Father?" Are they symbols that tell us something about the nature of God, and not only the human life of our Lord Jesus?

One must be clear that we are not entering into the unusual heresy of Patripassionism, that is, saying that the Father became incarnate and co-suffered the passion and crucifixion with the human Jesus. Fr. Gerald Vann, OP, in his work *The Passion of the Christ and the Sorrow of God*, writes with careful insight about the distinction between the Father's suffering and that of the Son, while acknowledging that the Father had a divine "pathos" toward His Son's passion. While the Greek philosophers reasoned that God is the Immovable Mover, Christian revelation implies that He nonetheless freely chooses to be moved by compassion, by a suffering with others.

We believe that "the Father dwells in light inaccessible," that no one here on earth has seen God the Father, but that the Son has made him known. No words are adequate to reveal Him except for the Word made flesh. While all words and symbols fall short of representing the mystery of God, as we heard from Pope Leo in Chapter 4 and from the Catechism in Chapter 7 above, the oneness of Jesus with the Father would indicate that the stigmata on His glorified body tell us something about the Father as well, if we interpret them in a symbolic way. St. Paul pointed the Corinthians in this direction when he went to them not with the "wordy wisdom" of the Greeks, but preaching Christ crucified, "the wisdom of God and the power of God" (1 Cor 1:24).

The Old Testament, while zealously defending the holiness and otherness of God, nonetheless uses very human imagery to describe Him. Since He inspired all of those words and images, as limited as they are, He must be OK with us using them. So back to the original question: How do the wounded hands and feet and heart of Jesus represent the Father?

The Old Testament speaks often of the hand of God, especially the right hand, in reference to His power. God the Father is Almighty and all-powerful. Nevertheless, it seems that He is always mysteriously and mercifully limiting the use of His power. For example, He promised Noah never to destroy the world again by a flood. He spoke often to Moses and the prophets about holding back His hand of punishment. Above all, He freely imposes a limit on his power and control over us by giving us free will. He could have made man like other creatures, but He decided to give us the ability to know Him or to ignore Him, to love Him or to reject Him. In this sense, the Almighty Creator has allowed His hands to be wounded by the rejection of those whom He lovingly created.

The Father is the giver of every good gift, most of all His Son and the Holy Spirit. We might say that He is eternally begetting the Son and the Holy Spirit. While the Son emptied

Himself by not grasping at His divine nature in the Incarnation, the Father "emptied" Himself by handing over His Son in the Incarnation. "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son..." (Jn 3:16). The Son is dearer to the Father than all of Creation. He shared with us His greatest treasure. Giving us His Son was like giving us Himself. The Catechism tells us that the sacrifice of Christ was also a gift of the Father (CCC #614).

Similarly, Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as the "Gift of God" (Jn 4:10). If an earthly father knows how to give good gifts to his children, how much more will our heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him! (cf Lk 11:13). That is, the Father's hand is always open in giving. By nature, God is always giving or self-diffusive. He is love. Because He is always giving and non-possessive, we can paradoxically say that He is in a continual state of being poor or empty. We find in Him the "coincidence of opposites" as St. Bonaventure said. Like hands that are all-powerful but empty.

The Father is always at work in the world through the Son. Their hands are united, to speak simply of a mystery of a communion and action that goes beyond words. God's work of creation is particularly for our enjoyment (Gen 1:29, 2:9). It seems that He intends His works, physical and spiritual, to give delight to others more than to Himself. His divine poverty and humility are evident by not demanding recognition of His works. St. Paul told the Romans that everyone should reasonably be able to believe in the Creator by pondering His works, but the fact is that many do not. We won't find a signature on any earthly or galactic object that says "made by the Father." Although the beauty and order of the universe are a kind of signature of a divine Source, He always leaves room for faith. My suspicion is that, at the end of the day, He wants to be able to excuse us (like His Son at Calvary), for not knowing what we were doing. This mysterious hiddenness of the Father may be attributed to His mercy and His humility. He is Empty Hands. He is humility.

When St. Francis wrote on a parchment a prayer called "The Praises of God," shortly after receiving the stigmata, he didn't just say that God was beautiful or humble. He prayed "You ARE beauty, You ARE humility, You ARE our strength, You ARE meekness" and much more. He wasn't just saying that God has these amazing qualities that may appear contradictory to us, but that He IS all of these virtues, and therefore the Source of them all.

The open arms of Jesus on the cross are also a sign of the Father's desire to embrace all of His children. Like the father of the Prodigal Son, the Father awaits our return to Him with open arms. How important it is that earthly fathers represent the Heavenly Father in this way with their children! How many people have difficulty trusting the Father because their parents were more interested in themselves than in their children? Nonetheless, the best way to bring healing to those family wounds is by getting to know the Father as He really is. He stretches out His hand to us with a tender love to heal us in the deepest core of our identity. He desires to heal us from those painful memories, but many respond by accusing Him of the sins and weaknesses of their earthly parents instead. The Father stands before us with open arms and we respond like the older son in the parable – ungrateful, complaining, prideful, unbelieving, and mistrusting His generosity. That is how we wound His invisible healing hands.

How might wounded feet reveal or describe something of the Father's love? He doesn't experience physical tiredness, although He speaks at times of being weary of His people (c.f. Is 7:13). Is the Father "wounded" by obedience? We may reverently say yes. That is, He freely chose to make Himself obedient to covenants with us, which we broke. At first, He mysteriously "walked" in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve, until they sinned and hid themselves from Him. Again and again He offered covenants with humanity, and again and again experienced unfaithfulness on our part. A covenant is sealed by

blood. We might think of the blood of animals as representing one's life, like saying "this is me if I break this bond." He is always faithful to His covenants, always obedient to His own promises. Many times in the Old Testament, we see Him freely and humbly choosing to "obey" His chosen people in their petitions for His help. He often tells them that He feels like a rejected Lover because of their unfaithfulness and disobedience to the covenant, their marriage bond with Him. That is how we have irreverently wounded His feet, again speaking in a symbolic way.

The Father had every right to break those covenants, because of our unfaithfulness, but we are told that He is always faithful, because He cannot deny His own nature (cf 2 Tm 2:13). How we need to learn from His faithfulness today! So many men and women are afraid to commit to each other and to the Lord and so easily break their commitments. The Father has sworn to be faithful and He will never go back on His word. In Him we find the solid ground to live in faithfulness and to reap the peace and joy that comes from it, even if tested by fire.

Turning now to the heart of the Father, we recall how the heart represents the hidden center or core of a person, what is most essential to someone. As we ponder that heart of the Father, we may ask how or what the Father feels. We know that the Father doesn't have a human heart, but since we were made in His image and likeness, our human hearts tell us something about Him. He speaks in various ways of His heart and His compassion through the prophets (cf. Hos 11:8). Although the Father doesn't have emotions, which strictly speaking refer to a somatic experience, the Old Testament is filled with references to very strong and varied feelings of God, such as love, hate, delight, anger, joy, and even jealousy. At the core, or heart, of these highly charged "emotional" words is God the Father's desire to be in close communion with His people. His desire is to love us and to be loved by us, and He uses very human words to try to get that message across to us. What He revealed through the prophets and other imperfect human filters in the Old Testament

was clarified by His Son, the One who reveals the Father perfectly. As the Catechism says, “only the Heart of Christ who knows the depths of His Father’s love could reveal to us the abyss of His mercy in so simple and beautiful a way” (#1439).

The heart of God the Father is mercy itself. If love is commonly symbolized by a heart, mercy ought to be symbolized by a wounded heart. The revelation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is of one accord with the revelation of Divine Mercy to St. Faustina, which calls us to prayer to the Father for mercy. There is no doubt that to look upon the wounded Heart of Christ is to look into the infinite abyss of the Father's mercy.

When the Heart of Christ was pierced by the sword, it was truly the Father's mercy that was poured out upon the world. The treasury or storehouse of mercy in the depths of God, in His heart, was opened up for the world at Calvary. The Father and the Son are one at heart, united in their love for each and every person. The perfection of the Father's mercy is also stronger than death. The Father's mercy guaranteed the resurrection of His Son. It is the Father's mercy that is victorious over sin. The pierced heart of the Father is life itself and the source of everlasting life for us. As we peer with awe and reverence into the wounded side of Christ and into His Heart, we see the light of the Father's glory.

A little boy asked one of our friars "Do we say God is holy because He has those holes in His hands and feet?" If we think about it, our answer to that funny little question should simply be "Yes."

In the Gospels, the Father only speaks directly from Heaven a few times, and it is usually to express His delight and love of the Son. As His adopted children, these words also reveal how the Father feels toward each of us. Jesus told His apostles at the Last Supper that the Father loves us as He loves the Son.

One time on a retreat, my director told me to ask for a new grace that day to know the Father’s delight in me. “OK,” I

was thinking, “I already know that.” Having been a friar and a priest already for many years, of course I would know that the Father delights in all of His children. However, as much as my mind knew it and my lips had repeated that to others, there was something in my heart that lacked that conviction. What was that word “delight” supposed to mean, anyway? I thought about how my natural father had died suddenly when I was two years old. Although my mother had re-married a few years later to a man who was a very good step-father to me, I nevertheless did not have any early childhood memories of my father delighting in me.

As I continued to pray and reflect on this that day during Eucharistic adoration in a church, I began to listen to a father and his child playing nearby, outside of the church. Although I couldn't see them through the high stained-glass windows, I could tell that they were playing a game, probably rolling a ball back and forth. The child seemed to be too young to speak but was laughing and squealing, and the father was happily encouraging him and showing his delight. Then I sensed God the Father saying to me, “Hey kiddo, that's like Me and you. That's how I delight in you.” At that moment, my head knowledge became heart knowledge. Then I asked the Lord what was going on in Heaven the day that my father was electrocuted, working in the backyard. What I heard interiorly was that Jesus had said, “Father, look at that family in Iowa, those eleven children with their mother, who just lost their father. Look at that little baby Richie. What are we going to do about them?” The Father replied, “We're going to take care of them, of course. We'll take very good care of them.” Then I began to consider with a grateful heart how the Father had indeed taken such good care of me during my whole life.

Do you ever ask the Father in prayer how He feels about you? That fire of love that was shown to St. Margaret Mary Alcoque in her vision of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is one response to that question by means of an image. His deep and tender compassion, that Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, proclaimed in his canticle (Lk 1:78), is an attempt to put it into

words. The Father is likely to share a more personal word about His love for you if you ask Him.

This might be a good time to step back for a moment and realize the difference between meditation and prayer. This is essentially a book of meditations. Meditations help us to know about the Lord, to ponder Him and to think about Him more deeply. The real goal, however, is the encounter with Him. Faith and prayerful conversation with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bring us much closer to God than thinking and meditating.

Here's an example of how to begin that conversation:

I praise you Father, Lord of Heaven and Earth, for revealing Yourself to Your little children.

*Please help me to trust you Father, as a little child;
to trust in Your generosity, Your patience, Your humility, Your healing power, Your faithfulness, Your mercy, Your delight in me, and Your infinite love for all of Your children.*

I love you, Father, and I desire that the whole world would believe in Your love.

*I ask this in the Name of Your Beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.
And Father, if You don't mind me asking, how do You feel about me?.....*

Our Lady of the Stigmata

“And a sword shall pierce your own soul as well.” (Lk 2:35)

Simeon's prophecy about our Lady's heart or soul being pierced by a sword was clearly fulfilled, and not only at Calvary, as we shall see. Would it be too much to say that her hands and feet were pierced as well, in a symbolic but very real sense?

We may ponder her unity with the wounded hands of her son as she lived a life of hidden labor with Him. While He and Joseph worked at construction or carpentry, she undoubtedly took care of the normal humble tasks of cleaning and cooking. She referred to herself as the “handmaid of the Lord”, and this became even more literally fulfilled in the service of her divine Son. While a mother certainly has a higher standing in the home than a servant, she may feel like a slave of her children at times!

When St. Francis wrote about the poverty of our Lord, he would usually mention “His poor mother” as well. Her material poverty was evident in giving birth to her Son in a barn and then fleeing as an immigrant to Egypt with Joseph and the baby Jesus, her only security being her faith in God. On a deeper level, from the beginning of her life she was full of grace because she was empty of herself. She was free not to grasp at her reputation or even at her life when she gave her assent at the Annunciation. After all, being with child in her situation could have meant being stoned to death according to the Law.

From the little information we have about her, it is clear that she was very generous, always ready to give a helping hand. She went to give a hand to Elizabeth as soon as she heard the news about her pregnancy, thinking more about her cousin's well-being than her own. She was concerned about how to help the newly married couple at Cana, with an important detail of hospitality. We might ponder the complementarity of her

concern to provide wine with the concern of her Son later on to provide bread, the two main elements for the Eucharist. Experiencing her own poverty and inability to take care of the need of that newly-married couple, she hands over to them the only treasure that she has; her Son.

No doubt she spoke gently with the gesture of open arms. We can picture her greeting Elizabeth with open arms that expressed her love. Although she is often depicted in prayer with her hands together, it is likely that she prayed frequently like other Jewish women with her arms lifted up in the "orans" position. One can easily imagine her in that posture of surrender as she responds to the message of the angel, "Let it be done unto me according to Your word." Even more we can see her lifting up her hands in praise as she proclaimed "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord!..." How interiorly free she must have been to lift up her whole heart to the Lord! Not that she was freed from trials or sorrows or misunderstandings, but free from selfishness and self-preoccupation. Her soul was like a clear magnifying glass, magnifying the light and fire of God's love.

Her Divine Son led her into an even more divine generosity, into a life-long gesture of open arms. Consider that band of disciples He formed around him. When they were in Capernaum, Peter's mother-in-law was there to serve them, but what about when they were closer to Nazareth? We can imagine that our Lord called upon her to provide hospitality for a bunch of hungry apostles. On a more interior level of generosity, He said that being His brother or sister or mother was open to anyone who did His father's will. Not only did this mean her "adopting" a small army of disciples, but it apparently meant she was to share her unique role of mother of the Messiah with other women as well. She was asked not to grasp at, not to jealousy guard, her unique relationship with her Son. No doubt, that invisible sword was already piercing her heart when she heard those words.

At Calvary, as our Lord hands over His beloved mother to

His beloved disciple, she is asked not only to hand over her Son to the grave, but also to take on a role as mother of all of the sons and daughters of the Church. Our Lord indeed fastens her hands open along with His at that moment of extreme generosity, knowing that she desires to participate in everything with Him.

Her feet participated in the obedience of her Son in a constant surrender to the Father's will. Being sent out away from her home to give birth to Him and then the experience of immigrating to Egypt required great docility and trust of the young mother of the Redeemer. Her response at the Annunciation, "Be it done unto me according to Your word," must have been her constant refrain throughout life. Whether in sickness or health, home or away, secure or not, she trusted and obeyed. At some point she must have realized that she owed the obedience of faith to her own Son. She had to humbly accept that reversal of roles. Notice how at Cana she respectfully asks her Son for help, but at the same time teaches obedience to the servants; "Do whatever He tells you" (Jn 2:5). She continues to teach us that trusting obedience when we are tempted to doubt in the Lord's providence.

She stood there at Calvary, her feet fastened willingly to the rocky ground in that most horrific place of death and torture, obedient with her Son to the Father's plan. Like her Son, she had learned obedience from what she had suffered, but it would only be perfected at Calvary. She was fastened to the ground there by the nails of faith, hope and love. We are told that a violent storm and wind came along after noon, presumably with torrents of cold rain that would normally make a person run for shelter. She stood there faithfully and obediently, as she did during all of the storms of His life.

How profoundly was Simeon's prophecy fulfilled at Calvary, that her heart would be pierced along with her Son's! We know from the Gospel that our Savior began to pray Psalm 22 from the cross, and the presumption is that He continued with the

rest of it, either vocally or in His Heart. No doubt, Our Lady was praying it with Him. How that interior sword must have pierced her heart when they came to the words in verses 9 and 10, "Yet you brought me out of the womb: you made me trust in you even at my mother's breast. From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother's womb you have been my God."

Perhaps memories flooded into her heart at that moment, of all the little piercing's that had taken place before that, like the anxious search for her 12-year-old son for three days; then when they finally found Him in the Temple, He told them, more or less, that they needed to let Him listen to His Heavenly Father instead. There were the countless letting go's - to the desert, to his mission, to misunderstandings, to hostilities. Her heart was wounded throughout her lifetime, as perhaps only a mother can understand, but in a more intense way because of the intensity of their love.

However, the sword of compassion that pierced her heart didn't defeat Our Lady. Rather it became her means of triumphing over the enemy. As it dug in at Calvary, she joined in her Son's prayer, "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they are doing." Her heart also became a transforming vessel of mercy.

Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, a Capuchin priest who preached for many years to the papal household, wrote that "the spiritual greatness of a person is not so much what God gives to a person but what He asks, and He asked more of Mary than of any other person, more than He asked of Abraham" (cf. *Mary, Mirror of the Church*, 81). It is true that she advanced in her unique pilgrimage, continually growing in faith, hope and charity by sharing in the wounds of her Son throughout her life. It seems that her cousin Elizabeth called her blessed, not so much for what she was given, but for what she gave, her trusting consent. She teaches us to trust in the Lord if He asks great things of us: to forgive like Him, to love like Him, or even to suffer like Him.

As she continues proclaiming the Lord's greatness in Heaven, adoring the Almighty who has done great things for her, perhaps all of the Heavenly host hear her Son reply, "My mother has also done great things for Me. Holy is her name as well!"

Why not join in her prayer?

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord.

My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

For He has looked with favor on His lowly servant...

*Dear mother Mary, please help me to participate
with faith, hope, and love in the sufferings of your Son,
so that I may be prepared like you
for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.
Amen.*

Within Those Victorious Wounds Hide Me

“Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed.”
(1 Pet 4:13)

“I believe that the fact that the Lord bears the stigmata for eternity has a symbolic value. As an expression of the atrocity of suffering and death, today the stigmata are seals of the Lord’s victory, of the full beauty of His victory and His love for us.”
(-P. Benedict XVI speaking to Italian priests, 8/31/06)

Here is a typical dialogue among Franciscan friars or sisters:

“How was your day, Brother/Sister?”

“-Perfect joy!”

“That bad, huh? What happened?...”

If the response “perfect joy” doesn’t lead you to presume it was a difficult day, we will give you a bit of background to this code word among Franciscans. It comes from the following story of St. Francis, briefly summarized here:

One wintery day, in the latter years of his life, St. Francis was walking with Br. Leo, heading toward a friary. St. Francis began a conversation asking Br. Leo how to arrive at perfect joy. Paraphrasing 1 Cor 13, Francis said that one doesn’t achieve it by converting all the sinners, or feeding all the hungry, or by working great miracles. Then Francis gave the surprising answer to his own question. Perfect joy would be if the friar who answered the door told them to get lost because they were worthless and ignorant, and left them out in the cold. He said if they could accept that treatment out of love for Christ, therein would be perfect joy and the salvation of their souls.

“That bad, huh?...”

St. Francis was indeed a man of great joy, of supernatural joy. It was a joy found on the other side of the cross, after having gone through it. It was a joy founded upon a deep love of the Savior, deep enough to desire to share in His sufferings. He was fulfilling what our Lord asked through St. Peter, “Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed” (1 Pt. 4:13).

Our Lord speaks of the joy of a woman after she has given birth to her child. Not only does she forget about the pain, but our Lord says that her sorrow is transformed or changed into joy. Notice that He didn’t just say that her sorrow will be surpassed by joy, but *transformed* into joy. Her very sorrow is transformed into something else. That is the transformation of love, which finds joy in being able to offer something for the beloved, like the offering of the pangs of childbirth for the beloved child.

This the secret of the joy of so many penitential saints over the ages. Penitential practices, like fasting or vigils, sometimes look scary from the outside, like a dull, dilapidated old house. However, when one enters inside he or she discovers there a beautiful garden full of fruit trees and flowers; that is, when the motive is love for Christ. Most religions have penitential practices of some kind, and there are natural and even spiritual benefits gained by them. However, with Christians it is a different reality, “new wine in new wineskins,” because it is all centered on the person of Christ. He unites our little offerings with His paschal mystery - His passion, death, resurrection, and ascension. When we are inspired to offer these acts, or accept the actions of others against us, freely and truly out of love, we begin to experience the joy of the resurrection even in this life. His wounds are like transformers of electricity that change one type of current into another. As St. Paul put it, “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body” (2 Cor 4:10).

St. Francis de Sales said that the only way to know if we have the *flame* of the love of Christ in our souls is if we desire to suffer with Him, and that everything else is merely smoke. That is a tough word to take in. However, that flame is the fire of the Holy Spirit, the burning flame of God's own charity, not something we have to somehow muster up from our own weak emotions. Repeatedly we see in the lives of the saints, the more that the Lord's grace takes over their hearts, the more they are able to offer heroic sufferings with great joy.

Sometimes when praying for the salvation of souls I have boldly said, "Lord Jesus, I don't know how Heaven will be heaven for me unless You get everyone there." The response that I have sometimes heard to that prayer is "Really? I've already offered my life for them. What are you going to offer?" Then in my hesitation, I realize that my desire for everyone's salvation is not as complete as I thought....

The merits of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection are infinite. However, He still desires that we participate in them. "To make up in my own flesh what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ," St. Paul said to the Colossians (1:24). It is an open invitation. In that sense, His wounds are open to include us, the Church, His Mystical Body on earth, in His offering.

It seems that Jesus kept the wounds of Calvary on His resurrected body as a kind of trophy, as "seals of the Lord's victory" as Pope Benedict XVI put it. Will we also have some signs of victory on our resurrected bodies? Will we have "spiritual tattoos" that represent situations that required great generosity or mercy from us? Perhaps some sign of a cancer, of a child we lost, or of religious vows? It may be that the new name that we receive in Heaven will include a title like "the Martyr," "the Confessor," "the Cancer Victim," or "the Faithful Husband." One might think that in Heaven we would want to forget about any suffering here, but I think anything that we offered here with the

Lord will be a cause of eternal joy and gratitude. In John's apocalyptic vision, the Lord is seen as the Lamb who was slain, even though He is perfectly glorified. It isn't that we will be seeking titles for ourselves, but that the Lord would "crown us with glory" in such a way because it would give glory to His grace at work in us and it would reveal to all His joy and delight in us.

Although our physical bodies often seem to get in the way of our spiritual desires, because of them we are able to offer something that the angels can't offer. We are able to offer ourselves bodily with Christ, and for that we shall be eternally grateful. How beautiful is our humanity offering this thanksgiving sacrifice, this Eucharist, with Jesus! "This is my Body, given up for you," is translated into countless daily actions like "This is my favorite dessert, given up for you," or "This is my time for a nap, given up for you."

One very hot summer day, a novice was telling one of our priests, Fr. Gregorio, how he wanted to give his life as a martyr for Christ. Fr. Gregorio smiled, and turning off the fan next to the novice, said, "Why not start today?" The novice understood the message, but wasn't expecting martyrdom to start so soon!

Every offering united with the wounds of Jesus bears spiritual fruit. The living water of the Holy Spirit that poured out of His side also springs up within us and overflows to bring refreshing new life to those around us. We recall how when St. Francis embraced the leper that he so desired to run from, what was bitter was transformed into sweetness. When manual labor helps to sand down our egos, when obedience gives us freedom from our self-centeredness, when accepting an illness moves us quickly along a path of conversion and wins graces for others, when rejection opens the door to perfect joy – all of these are signs here on earth of that future weight of glory beyond all price. We can understand why St. Paul wrote, "I desire only to know Christ and the power of His resurrection by reproducing the pattern of His death" (Phil 3:10)

The victory of those precious wounds is evident in very direct ways in the spiritual battle. Because the Lord Jesus conquered the kingdom of death by His own death, His wounds continue to be a means to confound and to overcome the Enemy. One of those ways is when we are assaulted interiorly by a lot of lies of the Accuser or temptations to doubt. Like St. Thomas, only without physically seeing Him, we can place all of our doubts into the wounds of Christ.

You can do this powerful prayer exercise when you find yourself in a time of doubt. I experienced this for the first time on a weeklong silent retreat, shortly after finishing a time of service in our Community. I was plagued by a lot of doubts and lies from the Enemy during that retreat. At one moment I wrote to the Lord a whole list of doubts running through my head, around 30 of them. The retreat director, a woman of great faith who has spent around 40 years of her life directing priests on retreat, knew just how to respond. She taught me how to renounce each of those doubts and place each one into the wounds of Jesus, and then listen to the truth that the Lord wanted to tell me to replace each of those lies. I remember writing down at least three phrases that came to mind quickly in response to each lie. Sometimes they were words from Scripture, or sometimes a simple statement of truth, like “the Community and I are safe in the hands of the Father.” It was a “St. Thomas moment” for me as I experienced the present power of those wounds of the risen Christ, and all of those doubts disappeared.

The simple prayer of protection to be hidden in His wounds continues to confound the Evil One. Two of our friars, Fr. Gregorio and Fr. John Anthony, experienced this while doing a prayer of deliverance with a young woman in Nicaragua. “Cecilia” was manifesting signs of spiritual oppression. Fr. John Anthony, began repeating silently in his heart, “*Lord Jesus, hide Cecilia in Your wounds.*” Immediately a strange voice came from her mouth saying, “Where is Cecilia? I can’t find Cecilia!”

“Henceforth let no one trouble me, for I bear the brand marks of Christ in my body,” wrote St. Paul to the Galatians (6:17). That “no one” may refer to human persecutors and invisible ones. I have often experienced His protection and strengthening through the simple plea “Lord Jesus, hide us in Your wounds.” It is like suddenly being placed far out in the ocean of His love, while the enemy is shooting his fiery darts from the shore, unable to reach anywhere near us. We may rest secure and joyful when our lives are hidden within His precious wounds.

He is fully alive. Those signs of death are now pouring out the life-giving waters of the Holy Spirit, renewing the face of the earth. Out of those signs of death and resurrection shine forth rays of the Father’s mercy and grace. As Charles Wesley wrote in the hymn *Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending*:

Those dear tokens of His Passion, still His dazzling body bears;
Cause of endless exultation to His ransomed worshippers.
O with what rapture, with what rapture, gaze we on those glorious scars!

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive all honor and glory and praise. Worthy are His wounds to be glorified and to give endless consolation, healing, and strengthening to His people!

Let us pray:

*Lord Jesus, You are worthy of endless adoration!
We adore Your wounded hands and feet and side.
Cover us with Your Precious Blood flowing from them, O Lord.
Hide us within Your wounds.
Destroy our doubts in Your wounds
and replace them with Your word and Your Spirit of Truth.
Transform our sorrows into a joy that begins Heaven on earth,
until that day when You call us to enter through those eternal*

*gates that You have unlocked by Your precious wounds.
There we shall be eternally grateful for every little offering
we were able to make with You.
May our lives and our wounds, hidden in Yours,
also shine forth Your eternal light and love. Amen.*