

Week 33

God's Love for Us, Our Response

Guide: Gratitude



Let us reflect on God's love for us and our response.

Next week is the final week of retreat. This week we look back, to contemplate what we have received in this retreat—*God's love itself*. And we consider *our response*. Our desire for this week is *to be filled with a deep sense of the gifts we have received*, and so filled with profound gratitude, that we will be moved *to love and serve God, in all things*, in our everyday lives.

Two convictions guide our reflections:

- Love expresses itself in deeds rather than mere words.
Love is the gift of self for the other.
- Love that is reciprocal grows.
Lovers give of themselves to each other, with each deep gift leading to a deeper response.

This week we will recall all of the gifts of love we have received during this retreat. We will remember all the ways God has given us graces that were the gift of self. We want to grow in gratitude for the activity of God's love for us, especially in the gift of Jesus for us, and the ways in which we have been blessed to know, love, and serve with Jesus.

This week we want to open our hearts to the broadest sense of God's love that we can imagine. Using images like the rays of the sun's warm light or the overwhelming power of a constant waterfall, we will consider how God's life-giving presence and love flow in and through all of creation, given to and for us. Use the resources this week to enter into these exercises of appreciation in detail.

With each level of gratitude, we want to express our love. Our response, and our offering of self in love, is what seals and strengthens the bonds of love between us and God. We will grow in a sense that all we have is gift. As we have grown in freedom, we can surrender ourselves in love more and more completely.

All week, with growing gratitude and deepening affection, I will make offerings of myself in these or similar words, until they become mine:

*Take, Lord, and
receive all my
liberty, my memory,
my understanding, my
entire will— all that I am
and possess.
You have given all
this to me. I now
return it all to you.
It is yours now.
Use these gifts according to
your will. Give me only your
love and your grace.
That is enough for me, and all that I desire.*

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

Our contemplation on the love of God for us, and our response, can be done both in several prayer periods and in the background times throughout our week.

What We Are Considering

For all these months, we have considered our relationship with God. We now draw it all together to understand and appreciate all that God has given us in this retreat, in our lives, and what God continues to give us.

- The blessings of creation, redemption, and the special graces we have received.
- God dwelling in every part of creation, especially in me.
- How God labors for us in all of creation, giving and sustaining life.
- How all blessings and gifts descend—as the sun’s light and water flowing from a fountain.

And we will consider our response.

The Grace We Ask For

Our desire for this week is to be filled with a deep sense of the gifts we have received, and so filled with profound gratitude, that we will be moved to love and serve God, in all things, in our everyday lives. The prayer for this week helps us ask for this grace.

Our Daily Life Contemplation

It is very important to try to focus our attention this week on gratitude for God’s love. The two convictions about love from our guide are critical: love consists more in deeds than in words, and love involves the mutual exchange of gifts between lovers. It would be very helpful to set aside some brief prayer times, using this simple help:

- Begin by feeling the presence of God.
- Ask for the grace you desire—an intimate sense of God’s love for you.
- Reflect on God’s love:
 - What has God done for you?
 - What has God given you?
 - How does God sustain you?

What is God
offering you?

- Speak, lover to lover, with words, feelings of gratitude.
- Write down what you wish to remember.

These are not just intellectual reflections. We are asking for intimacy here, and our goal is that our memory and our accounting of God's gifts will fill us with deep and moving gratitude and stir our hearts to a response of love and service.

The Daily Means

These reflections will become a part of the movements of our everyday lives this week if we can make use of the means we've been practicing for so long. It involves how we *focus* at the beginning and end of each day. If we get up each day and capture a moment to focus our consciousness and desire for the day at the time we do something very routine (like putting on our slippers or robe), we develop a pattern that will serve us very well this week and all our lives. It changes the way we experience our busy days. That brief moment is *there* every morning. We just need to use it. And if we take a similar moment each night, before we go to bed, at a routine time, we can end each day receiving and giving thanks for the graces we receive. In that brief, nightly moment we can grow in awareness of God's activity in our busy days and become more and more grateful, even in the most difficult of times.

Opportunities arise throughout the day, in all the *background* times we have. Driving, walking from one place to another, pausing to think, transitioning from one thing to another. Those times are *there*, no matter how brief. They are usually filled with something—some worry or planning or daydreaming. We can use them—even if they are thirty seconds long—to focus our attention, to return to the thought and desire of the morning, to note how *this upcoming event of our day* fits into this desire we have.

Some examples might help. I am taking a shower. My mind is already zooming to the day ahead. Can I focus, for just a minute, for even a simple prayer? "Lord, help me to know you are with me today. I need you. Help me to stay open to discover ways you love me."

I am driving to work. My mind is perhaps filled with what I need to do today. Perhaps I have others in the car with me. Perhaps it's my habit to listen to the radio. Can I take just a moment to return my focus to the Lord's presence? It will change how I listen to the radio or deal with the people I'm with in the car. Perhaps I am alone and can turn the radio off and give myself twenty or thirty minutes of time to focus and reflect. I could look at each of the events in my upcoming day and prepare to enter into them in the way I desire.

There will inevitably be some challenges in my day, perhaps even some conflicts. As I become more and more reflective, I will become more and more familiar with the patterns I display. In the approach to those situations and people, I can take just a moment and let the *background* reflection prepare me. Perhaps I can take a slow, deep breath and in fifteen seconds pray: "Lord, I know you love me. Let me experience your sustaining love and care here." Or "Lord, you have forgiven me so many times for this pattern. Thank you for your love and mercy. Fill me with your peace now." Or "Lord, you have let me desire to be *with you* before. Let me be *with you* here, so that your love can flow through me." Or "Take, Lord, receive. I offer myself to you in this. Give me only your love and your grace. I ask for nothing more."

Whether I find time for prayer periods this week or do my reflections throughout the week in the background times, it can be very profitable to keep repeating the "Take, Lord, receive" prayer. Perhaps I can memorize it or find my own words for it.

Make use of the various resources provided for this week, especially “For the Journey” and the sample words for prayer in “In These or Similar Words . . .”

The whole retreat comes together this week. The Lord who brought us along this path will continue to bless us with his love and with the grace for our response.

For the Journey: Marvels

This final exercise of the retreat is modeled on the final reflection in the Spiritual Exercises. There is an irony here. Though it is the final exercise, the making of the Exercises never ends. God does not send us a certificate proclaiming, “You have successfully finished the course.” Paul himself wrote that he had not reached the finish line but pressed on. So, we finish our beginning and continue our being created and recreated by the love of God. Two points for Ignatius were very important during these last exercises: love consists more in deeds than in words, and love is a mutual handing over to the other of all that one has. In the first “For the Journey” we are encouraged not to look for progress or lack of it during our journeys. Instead, we have been encouraged to watch Love at work, manifesting that love in deeds and in the handing over to us all the gifts of grace and life that we have been offered.

This week we pray with the receptivity of children who sense how deeply they are loved. Ignatius wrote the Exercises to be very personal and so we move from the general *we* to the very particular *I*. Children in our culture, at the end of opening all their Christmas presents, might have a feeling of “Is this all there is?” Maybe after evaluating his or her siblings’ gifts, he or she might feel cheated or less loved. This is very human and understandable.

We are encouraged to be the Christmas-presented child who, after seeing our gifts and those of others, wants to look at his parents and relatives and wonder, “Why are they so good and loving to me?” It is in this spirit of grateful wonder that Ignatius asks us to make some response of love freely. “All I have, You have given me. What I can give You back is my selfish, possessive and exclusive possession and use of them. I ask only that You bless and grace me in our future together. That would be enough for me and a beginning for You.”

We walk through a world of created gifts: trees, flowers, birds of all sizes and kinds, amazingly diverse, and all these presents given to us.

Looking up at the moon, the stars, we marvel at the changes of the weather as the sun moves back and forth keeping this world at the proper temperatures for life and growth. All this God hands over to us.

We return to the childlike puzzling at the littlest things and muse that God has always and is always at work to hand things to us. God is laboring to attract us but not force us to see the divine finger and hand and arm and self, creating us and all else for us as well. This exercise increases our awareness of how everything is a gift and at the same time an invitation. We are both the recipient and the responder. Once we are aware of how God exists in everything and everything exists in God, how can we keep from singing, from watching and listening, from sharing and from wanting to know what is being offered at any one moment of our life? The river of God’s love flows on whether or not we are attentive to its presents and presence. We want to be less unavailable to the Giver of Love who works and does things in our life so as to reduce us to the wondering child of God we are. The “child of God” is a mature human who knows what things are, where they have come from, and where they are taking us. All things that come from God return to God, including us.

We leave this retreat to live so that we constantly recover sight and sensitivity to the goodness of God and the goodness of this God-love self that we are.

In These or Similar Words . . .

Dearest friend Jesus,

My heart is so full. I feel loved and honored and graced and flawed and loved all over again. I am full of wonder for the love I feel from you and for you. Yes, I am so aware of my flaws and how they sometimes keep me from feeling the love you are pouring on me at every moment. But right now I also feel your deep love and care for me, especially right there, in my weaknesses, those parts of me I want to hide in the dark. Your love brings it out into the light of your warmth and suddenly, I seem to be freer from it.

Now, after these many months of talking with you, loving you, and accepting your love in a whole new way, I realize that you will always, always be with me, even in—or especially in—my weaknesses.

And the gifts! So many gifts you have lavished on me over my lifetime. I feel so deeply your love for me. I see the many ways you love me each day, in the world around me, in the many people you put into my life to love me each day.

The line from Scripture returns to me over and over as I ponder this joyful puzzle: What return can I make for all that the Lord has given me? What is it, Jesus? How can I ever show you the kind of love I feel for you or thank you for all you have given me? I want to give you everything I have.

I want to respond to these many gifts in some way that comes from the deepest part of my being, and every time I think of the many ways you have loved me and given me gifts, I know I want to give you everything I have.

Jesus, you have given me so much, just as the prayer says: my mind, my liberty, memory, understanding, my entire will, and my being. Everything I am in this life, I am because of what you have given me. What can I ever do to thank you? Please, dear friend, may I present these gifts back to you? Can I ask you to use them in this world, for your world, in any way you would like? I want to be free enough to offer you my life. What would you like to do with it? How can I use my life to serve you in this world? How can I love others, as you would like me to?

I look forward with great joy to the weeks and months ahead, dear Jesus, so that together, as we continue to talk, I will discover the answers to these questions.

I thank you for my life. I thank you with my life.