

FOLLOWING CHRIST

A LENTEN READER TO STRETCH YOUR SOUL

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Following Christ: A Lenten Reader to Stretch Your Soul

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May these wise words shine
on our wintry souls,
frozen by loneliness and hurt,
and thaw us.

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INTRODUCTION

Nothing is so beautiful as spring.

—GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

After days of endless, sunless cold, another morning dawns and I balk, blue plastic scraper in hand, at the thought of scratching ice from my windshield one more time, pausing instead to scan still barren trees for tiny, tight green furls against the gray. Tired of heavy long johns, turtlenecks, wool sweaters, thick socks, gloves, hats, mufflers, big coats, and cramped dark days inside, our sluggish souls crave the pilgrimage toward light and hope. We wait for that first purple crocus, and count down the days until we can throw on a T-shirt, shorts, and sandals.

This kind of eager waiting is the essence of Lent, that forty-day period between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday. *Lent* was first spelled *lencten*, the Old English word for "springtime," rooted in the verb *lengan*, "to become longer," which refers to the lengthening days we all greet with great joy as signals of nature's resurrection in lemon-yellow jonquils, sunny wisps of forsythia, and pink-and-lavender Japanese magnolias.

This seasonal shift is a compelling metaphor for those who want to be more spiritually authentic. As my friend George Thomason says, "Lent is so powerful in its stillness; I always feel like a seed in the cradle of the dark winter earth, tense with expectation." Lent is the season for being still, for waiting in the dark on that first soft light of spring.

THE TRANSFORMATIVE DISCIPLINE OF WAITING ON GOD

To the ancient church, Lent's forty days symbolized obedience—waiting on God. The most well-known biblical models of this intentional patience are Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. Each fasted forty days in solitude, were tested and purified, and lived out this truth: "Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him."

We want wholeness, too, so we wait, stretching our souls toward the sun of God's forgiveness. Alone with God, we dare new surrenders that can heal us and make us whole. The imminent greening of God's creation feels like a personal invitation. It is the time of Lent. We listen.

In this Lenten reader, we hear from many rich voices of those who waited on God long before us. From well-known writers to lesser-known mystics and even an Anonymous or two—all have been chosen because they spent their lives listening to and developing a relationship with the profound eloquence of God's silence and its twin, loving others. The sixteenth-century Spanish mystic John of the Cross once said, "Silence is God's first language." Learning how to listen to God's silence is the crux of this devotional.

In these pages we find the life-changing wisdom of Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen, John Donne, Dante, Thomas à Kempis, Richard Rolle, Bernard of Clairvaux, and even Anglo-Saxon writers. We listen to the sagacity of saints like Benedict, Augustine, Gregory, Bonaventure, Anthony, and Ignatius. We learn from mystics like Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, Richard of St. Victor, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Gertrude the Great, Birgitta of Sweden, and Umiltà of Faenza. We drink in the enduring words of Desert Fathers and Mothers such as Abba (Father) Poemen, Amma (Mother) Theodora, and John Cassian. To introduce you further to each voice behind the quoted material, a short biography for each is provided in Appendix A.

Their voices cross the centuries. Their insights stretch from the oral traditions of the Egyptian deserts to the styli-scratched, brown-iron-gall-inked vellum manuscripts preserving sermons, poems, and rich devotional literature to the brilliant printed works of the Renaissance. Our ancient mentors never knew our jittery, vertigo-inducing wireless world, but, because each was a person of prayer, their words reveal why we have every reason to wait on God with great joy, in all circumstances. Their tried-and-true principles can guide us through our post-postmodern broadband jungle, showing us the enduring value of Isaiah's words: "Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

THE STATIONS OF THE CROSS

This devotional offers a unique approach to participating in Lent. Its readings have been selected to reflect the themes of the Cross, such as obedience, humility, grace, godly sorrow, and redemption; these themes, in turn, are organized around the stations of the cross, also called the "way of the cross" (*Via Crucis*) or the

"way of sorrow" (*Via Dolorosa*). One of the earliest Christian devotional exercises, the stations of the cross commemorates the passion and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, with each station representing an event that took place during the last week of Jesus' life. First observed in the Middle Ages by Christian pilgrims visiting the Holy Land and the sites of Jesus' passion, its use has been encouraged through the centuries by leaders of the church—especially Franciscan and Jesuit monks—because walking the stations of the cross strengthens a pilgrim's faith in the God of love.

Devotion to these stations grew when they were adapted to meet the needs of many ancient pilgrims who could not travel to Jerusalem to walk the literal way of the cross—starting at the Garden of Gethsemane, on to the high priest's courtyard, to Pilate's house, through Jerusalem, out to the hill known as Calvary or Golgotha on which Jesus was crucified, and finally ending at the tomb. For Christians who could not physically make the journey to Jerusalem, a picture or a sculpture depicting each stage of Jesus' journey to the cross was erected in or near a local church or other public venue. During Lent, then, people walked from station to station, as they do today, immersing themselves in Bible verses and meditating on the

meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection in the hopes of living different, better, kinder, and more peaceful lives.

Over the years, this Catholic practice has been embraced by Christians of all denominations for its powerful ability to reintroduce us to the reality of Christ's abiding presence in our lives. No longer thought of in the same context as the corrupt indulgences of the Middle Ages, the stations of the cross are known by many to be a genuine devotional path. Protestants find this ancient practice allows them to connect with the stages of Christ's journey on earth, not on a superficial or emotional level, but in a profoundly transformative way. Anyone whose spiritual goal is learning how to imitate Christ's love-filled walk through darkness into light finds everlasting hope in the stations of the cross.

This book helps readers make this spiritual pilgrimage of prayer during Lent, or at any other time, by reminding that life is largely about making the journey of maturity. As we read 1 Corinthians, we are challenged to stop speaking, thinking, and reasoning like petty children, and to grow up. Our adventure into wisdom, like any trip we take, has many stops along the way, and we may think of these

developmental stages as "stations." It is worth considering what a station is. Rooted in the Latin word meaning "to stand," *station* calls up the image of a person "standing" at a bus stop, waiting for the next bus to arrive. Stations, whether they are for buses, taxis, or trains, are places where people stop and wait, en route to somewhere else. Similarly, in this life, we are always waiting on God, en route to heaven. This devotional helps us learn to be kind to others waiting beside us at the bus stop.

Over the centuries, there have been different stations of the cross. Until recently, this list represented the fourteen traditional stations:

1. Jesus is condemned to death.
2. Jesus is handed his cross.
3. Jesus falls for the first time.
4. Jesus meets his mother.
5. Simon of Cyrene is required to carry Jesus' cross.
6. Veronica wipes the face of Jesus.
7. Jesus falls a second time.
8. Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem.
9. Jesus falls a third time.
10. Jesus is stripped of his clothes.
11. Jesus is crucified.

12. Jesus dies on the cross.
13. Jesus' body is taken down from the cross.
14. The body of Jesus is placed in the tomb.

In the twentieth century, there was a profound shift in the makeup of the stations of the cross, away from legend and toward a solely scriptural foundation. In 1991, Pope John Paul II made this change official when he deleted from this traditional stations list those events not found in the Scriptures, replacing them with other stations taken directly from the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life. The resulting list of the stations of the cross by Pope John Paul II includes fourteen stations entirely based on the Bible in their commemoration of the passion of Jesus.

Megan McKenna outlines these modern scriptural stations in her book *The New Stations of the Cross: The Way of the Cross According to Scripture*:

1. Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane.
2. Jesus is betrayed by Judas.
3. Jesus is condemned to death by the Sanhedrin.
4. Jesus is denied by Peter.
5. Jesus is judged by Pilate.
6. Jesus is scourged and crowned with thorns.

7. Jesus carries his cross.
8. Jesus is helped by Simon of Cyrene.
9. Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem.
10. Jesus is crucified.
11. Jesus promises to share his reign with the good thief.
12. Jesus is on the cross, with his mother and disciple below.
13. Jesus dies on the cross.
14. Jesus is placed in the tomb.

McKenna and many other devotional writers today add a fifteenth station, "Jesus rises from the dead." This Lenten book follows their lead because the gospel is literally the "Good News" of Christ—the *godspel* in Old English, from *god* ("good") and *spel* ("story, message"). Any devotional practice must take us through darkness bravely and into the light of love.

THOMAS MERTON ON THE DANGER OF LOVING

This book that you now hold is quite serious about leading you (and me) further along the path of love, which always seems to require a genuine encounter with and intimate study of the Bible. Therefore, interwoven

with the sage words of ancient Christians here we also find Bible passages pointing us to Christ's life and wisdom. As discussed later in this introduction, we will not simply be reading these Bible verses; we will be "eating" them in the ancient practice known as the *lectio divina*, a slow "divine reading" of Scripture that feeds our souls.

The monk Thomas Merton reminds us of the power of such scriptural reflection: "Any serious reading of the Bible means personal involvement in it, not simple mental agreement with abstract propositions. And involvement is dangerous, because it lays one open to unforeseen conclusions."

Merton's use of "dangerous" here suggests—not the going-over-a-cliff-in-a-car kind of physical peril—but the very real invisible risks involved in any close personal relationship, such as the intimacy that we have with Christ. It is the danger a person feels who has not only fallen in love but who chooses to stand at an altar, promising to be faithful and true to his or her beloved—for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health—and to love and to cherish until death. In a commitment to love, things shift inside your soul. You start struggling with long-held prejudices. You give up and give over

and see the world differently as your world weaves with another's.

This book is meant to take us on this dangerous journey. As we meditate on God's Word, walking the stations of the cross through the journey of prayer, we grow more intimate with the Lord of peace. Becoming better friends with God, we also notice that this spiritual pilgrimage keeps us close to the nourishing paradox of our faith—Christ's cross. As Matthew writes in his Gospel: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?" Christ's suffering is at the heart of all we do, and if we want to be in a relationship with Jesus, we must follow in his footsteps.

The wise men and women quoted in this book teach us how to be passionate about loving God, ourselves, and others, never forgetting that "passion" is rooted in the Latin *patior*, "to suffer." They show us we too can pick up a painful cross and follow Christ on the steps of his journey. Being faithful to Christ, even in the most painful circumstances, is possible. The witness of these men and women gives us the confidence

to try. Even as Thomas à Kempis acknowledges the unending nature of our suffering, he encourages us with his observations in *Imitation of Christ* about how the risen, once-crucified Lord in us makes the impossible possible:

If you want to grow the faith of your soul, read Scripture with humility and simplicity, never making it your goal to gain a reputation for being “learned.” Also read the wise words of ancient Christians attentively, and let them work their purpose in you. For the wiser a person is and the simpler the heart, the more Christ’s light can enter into a person’s life, and that which seems naturally impossible to us becomes possible through Christ’s grace. So do not be discouraged when a problem arises. Consider painful circumstances helpful. They’re good for your soul. Instead, let Christ strengthen you with his heavenly courage.

This Lenten devotional reminds us that our *passionate* friend “suffers with” us daily. It is perhaps the sweetest-tasting wisdom—Christ’s constant, strengthening presence in our lives. John of the Cross promises that quiet times with God lead to real happiness even in struggle:

We use ladders for climbing, to reach things we need. In the same way, the soul climbs through the usefulness of contemplation and its mysteries up to divine knowledge, our greatest necessity. David sang about this in the Psalms: "Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. They go from strength to strength." The treasure at the top of the ladder is God. He is the only one who can make us happy.

Page after page, these ancient souls direct us back to Christ. As Karol Wojtyła wrote before he became Pope John Paul II, "I am a wayfarer on the narrow pavement of earth and I do not put aside the thought of Your face, which the world does not reveal to me."

LENT'S COMPASSIONATE ALERTNESS

Lent is also a time of penance, of repairing our relationship with God and with our neighbor. The Lenten themes for the stations of the cross reflect the penitent nature of this path:

• STATION 1 •

Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane
THE WAKING OF PRAYER

• STATION 2 •

Jesus is betrayed by Judas

THE CHOICE OF OBEDIENCE

• STATION 3 •

Jesus is condemned to death by the Sanhedrin

THE PURIFYING OF SELF-EXAMINATION

• STATION 4 •

Jesus is denied by Peter

THE HEALING OF HUMILITY

• STATION 5 •

Jesus is judged by Pilate

THE GIFT OF GRACE

• STATION 6 •

Jesus is scourged and crowned with thorns

THE DARKNESS OF SUFFERING

AND ITS MEANING

• STATION 7 •

Jesus carries his cross

THE BEAUTY OF ENDURANCE

• STATION 8 •

Jesus is helped by Simon of Cyrene

THE NECESSITY OF FRIENDSHIP

• STATION 9 •

Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem

THE KNOWLEDGE OF GODLY SORROW

• STATION 10 •

Jesus is crucified

THE FORGIVING SACRIFICE

• STATION 11 •

**Jesus promises to share his reign
with the good thief**

THE JOY OF REDEMPTION

• STATION 12 •

**Jesus is on the cross,
with his mother and disciple below**

THE COMMUNITY OF AGAPE LOVE

• STATION 13 •

Jesus dies on the cross

THE TRUST OF LISTENING

• STATION 14 •

Jesus is placed in the tomb

THE BIRTH OF COURAGE

• STATION 15 •

Jesus rises from the dead

THE PREPARATION ON EARTH
FOR ETERNAL LIFE

This book provides you a devotional for every morning and evening of Lent, plus the seven Lenten Sundays, even though Sundays are not traditionally counted in the forty days of the season. These short devotionals open

windows on the unchanging nature of divine kindness. They begin and end each day with words reconnecting us with the most important truth—God loves us.

Each of the fifteen stations is introduced by a Bible passage presenting the historical moment of that station, followed by other verses that transition the reader to a paragraph or two introducing that station's theme. Here's how this looks: Station One and its theme, "The Waking of Prayer," are introduced by a reading from Mark 14, where Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane; following this passage is a verse from Genesis often read in Ash Wednesday services, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19); and then we read from Romans, "It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep" (Rom. 13:11). These latter two verses strengthen Station One's theme, reminding us that we are lethargic, mortal "dust," who need daily to seek a "waking" through prayer.

MAKING TIME FOR GOD IN
LECTIO DIVINA

This book helps us to meet with God during Lent, or at any time we wish to explore Christ's journey through the stations of the cross. Just set aside forty days (or a week, a few days, a day) as a private spiritual

retreat. To start, you only need a few minutes after breakfast and several minutes before bed for peaceful reflection in the ancient monastic tradition of *lectio divina* or "divine reading." Since ancient times, this spiritual discipline has been compared to the ruminating eating behavior of certain animals. *Ruminate*, from the Latin *ruminare*, means "to chew the cud, turn over in the mind."

Lectio divina requires only two tools: Scripture (or any of the wise passages in this devotional) and a completely unhurried time of personal reflection. Instead of rushing through the text, you retreat to your favorite place. Sit down. Do whatever you need to be comfortable. Then just sit there and focus on Scripture.

Let's use Philippians 4:4–7 as an example. It is one of my favorite passages. I have often chewed on it in *lectio divina*–style reflection:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

STEP ONE

Lectio (Reading and Listening)

The practice of *lectio divina* has four simple steps. First, "take a bite." Read the passage slowly, letting your attention settle where it wants. Read the verses aloud if that helps you focus. As you listen, you will find that certain words or phrases have something to say to you. Let your soul gravitate to these. They will begin speaking to you.

In these verses from Philippians, I am drawn to the word *Rejoice*. It is not presented as an option, but a requirement—I *must* "rejoice in the Lord" (v. 4a). As if I did not hear this command well enough, Paul says again, "Rejoice" (v. 4b).

But how? is the question my spirit raises. I keep reading, and my question is immediately answered in the text: "Let your gentleness be known to everyone" (v. 5). *Be gentle. Rejoicing and being gentle rarely come naturally to me, but Scripture suggests they are interconnected. Do one, you get the other. Mother always said, "Count your blessings." Could counting my blessings and thanking God make me gentler?*

I keep reading, slowly. The next verses in Philippians instruct me not to worry: "Do not worry about anything" (v. 6a). *Anything? How?* "In everything

by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (v. 6b). *I should turn to you. Ask you. Confide in you. Be thankful.* "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (v. 7). *Peace will "guard" my heart against the onslaught of worry if I thank God for my blessings and also confide in him with my troubles.*

STEP TWO

Meditatio (Meditation)

Scripture comes mysteriously and powerfully alive when we slow ourselves in it. The second step is *meditation*, when we stop to reflect on the passage. Continuing the metaphor of feeding on the Word, next we "chew" the Scripture passage. Obviously, I engage in some of this reflection during step one, but this is fine because the different stages of *lectio divina* are not rigid categories. They compose a fluid process of discovery.

In step two, however, this reflection intensifies. Try to enter the passage or verse you have read. Pay careful attention to the words. In this passage from Philippians, I find that the verbs, "rejoice," "do [not] worry," and "will guard," as well as the nouns,

"gentleness," "prayer," "thanksgiving," "peace," and "Christ" are spiritually nourishing, but the word that most sticks to the ribs of my soul is a small one, the preposition "in," appearing three times: "Rejoice *in* the Lord always"; "Do not worry about anything, but *in* everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God"; and "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds *in* Christ Jesus." This preposition, "in," gives the verbs their Christocentric power: if I rejoice *in* the Lord always and *in* everything thank God, telling him about my anxieties and stress, I will be guarded by God's peace *in* Christ.

In *lectio divina*, also let your mind, your memories, your imagination, your emotions, and your life experiences engage with the verses. Sit silently and pay attention to the things that come to you. Ask God, "What can I learn from this verse?" Or, "How can it heal me?" Or, "How can I live out this truth?"

If the passage is a story, such as the prodigal son parable, ask yourself who you are in the story. Are you the father looking for a lost loved one, the rebellious and estranged child, or the sullen elder son? Or, in a different story, imagine that you are the

leper miraculously healed by Jesus. What was this encounter with divine healing like? Let yourself ask questions such as: *Who is Jesus? What was my life like before I met Christ? How did being with him make me feel? How is my life different now that I know his healing? What must I do now?*

This period of reflection can also be emotional. The passage from Phillipians 4 reminds me how much of my life I have spent worrying and complaining, *not* rejoicing. That makes me sad. So I sit with that sadness awhile and let the verse become personal to me. This Bible verse is no longer an abstract truth telling everybody else to rejoice; as I listen to it, it is talking to me personally. It is saying to *me*, "Rejoice."

Then I find myself analyzing why I stop rejoicing so often in my daily life. Why am I often down? One reason is I work too hard and find resting difficult; therefore, I am exhausted much of my life. I am reminded—not for the first time in my type A-style life—that learning to rest is the key to my soul's health. I have never needed a scholarly commentary to know this truth; by slowing down and engaging in *lectio divina*, I realize over and over that learning to rest in Christ ought to become my life's work.

This truth brings us to another point about this ancient practice. Save the intense use of excellent Bible commentaries for another time. Never give up the regular study of the Bible in the company of the best scholars, but there is no need to consult them during *lectio divina*, which is meant to be a personal encounter with Scripture. Your heart is authority enough for you in this discipline. Scripture will reveal itself to you if you open your soul to its promptings and let honesty be your favorite form of exegesis.

STEP THREE

Oratio (Prayer)

Then pray. “Savor” the Word. Reading Scripture in this way often stirs up feelings, memories, hurts, inexpressible joy, and, yes, a multitude of worries. Give your emotions and your ghosts and your pain and your fear to God. Name them, one by one. Or let them lump themselves into a single yearning, and speak that. “God, help me” always works. Or, “Christ, I am sick; heal me.” Or some passage that you read may fill you with joy. Then rejoice. Thank God. How often in the hours of a day do we say, “Thank you, God.”

Or you may find your sorrow too profound for words or your gratitude too great for anything but silence. In either case, the Holy Spirit prays for us, as Paul says. When we falter, the Spirit helps us; when we do not know how to pray, God's Spirit intercedes for us "with sighs too deep for words."

It can also happen that you do not feel anything much at all. That response is also valid. It does not signal that your time of *lectio divina* has failed. No two times of *lectio divina* are alike. Simply trust in God's direction through this time and move on to step four.

STEP FOUR

Contemplatio (Contemplation)

The final step is surrender. "Digest" the Word. Here we do that hard work of letting go and resting in God. The Christian authors quoted in this book understood that we starve spiritually unless we embrace the quiet the psalmist recommends. With this book, we can make God's love our "hiding place" and listen to our Creator as he invites us into a deeper intimacy with him: "Be still, and know that I am God!"

This next step of not-thinking is difficult for many. I who am addicted to the overanalyzing synonymous with "worrying" find that my excuse for not surrendering in the quiet to God's still presence is that I am a harried middle-aged woman trying to meet book deadlines and also be present to raise a teenager and a third grader with gentle, firm love. What's your excuse?

If we sit in *lectio divina* for a few minutes each day (additionally, I love to walk in *lectio divina* with a Bible verse typed on a notecard), we soon find that our hungry, wireless-world souls are truly fed by this ancient practice first taught by Benedict of Nursia one and a half millennia ago.

IDENTIFYING WITH CHRIST

These devotionals organized around the stations of the cross are the blossoms of *lectio divina*, practiced by the spiritual authors presented here, who sat with, waited on, listened to, and longed for God. By spending time with them, we learn how to make these words from Matthew a reality for our lives: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Sitting in silence

with these close friends of Christ, we travel directly through our own soul's struggles—fear, betrayal, disappointment, condemnation, injustice, suffering, burdens, godly sorrow, sacrifice, redemption, humility, community, trust, grief, and the triumphant joy of love.

When through *lectio divina* we enter into the space where the God-man Jesus lives, we also begin identifying with the Christ who loves us intimately; which is to say, we begin to follow him spiritually. Station by station, here is our Christocentric journey through this book: Station One—in difficult times, we walk with Jesus into the waking prayer of the Garden of Gethsemane. Station Two—when we are betrayed, as Christ is by his disciple Judas, we understand that obedience is always a choice with profound consequences. Station Three—when we find ourselves judging others, as the most powerful religious leaders (the Sanhedrin) condemn Jesus, we seek the purifying self-examination that can teach us how to love others. Station Four—when we experience abandonment, as Christ does when his close friend Peter denies ever having known him, we remember that only through humility can our own self-centeredness be healed.

Station Five—when life seems unfair to us, we remember that the sinless, silent Christ understands, standing before the cowardly Pilate's injustice and slander, and we pray for the gift of God's grace to strengthen us in our decisions.

Station Six—when we walk through physical pain and humiliation, we contemplate that Christ is scourged and crowned with thorns, and his acceptance of suffering and presence in our pain give it meaning. Station Seven—when our problems seem weighty, we see Christ picking up his own heavy cross and are encouraged by the beauty of his endurance. Station Eight—when we are overwhelmed by life's hardships, we see Simon of Cyrene shouldering Christ's cross, and are reminded of the necessity of friendship, of shouldering someone else's burdensome cross and carrying it for them, and of letting a friend do the same for us. Station Nine—when we know the deep pangs of spiritual regret, instead of refusing this maturing knowledge, we embrace it, remembering that Jesus listens to the grieving women of Jerusalem and urges them to focus instead on learning godly sorrow. Station Ten—when our sinfulness deadens our souls, we look to the cross, where Christ's sacrifice makes our forgiveness possible.

Station Eleven—when we behave in a way that breaks God’s law, we are beckoned to turn to Christ, as the good thief does, and find there the joy of our redemption. Station Twelve—in every situation, we should encourage community, imitating Christ’s concern on the cross for his mother Mary and disciple John by living out agape love. Station Thirteen—when our souls are desolate and God seems dead, we desperately need to fix our eyes on Christ’s victory on the cross, never losing our trust in God and remaining faithful by listening to him. Station Fourteen—and when our prayers seem dry and our hearts afraid, we remember that Christ is in the tomb for a reason, to give birth to our courageous hearts. Station Fifteen—finally, we rejoice at seeing Christ emerge alive and whole from the grave and know that he lives in us now, strengthening us as on earth we prepare our souls for eternal life.

WALKING THROUGH THE STATIONS

As we contemplatively read through the stations of the cross, we do well to remember why we make this meditative journey. As Father Laurence Freeman pointed out in a sermon for All Souls Day at the

Benedictine Priory in Montreal, "Every time we meditate, we participate in the death of Christ." This quiet "mini-death" gives our souls a taste of the wisdom of Paul's beautiful hymn in the book of Philippians, where he describes the *kenosis* ("emptying") that each of us must experience if we want to imitate Christ:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

PRAYING WITH A NAKED INTENT

In a slender fourteenth-century masterpiece on prayer, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous English monk explains how we can make ourselves humbly available to God in prayer. Taking his advice, we can let it guide us along the way of the cross here and now. Anonymous says, "Be bold" reading, walking, and praying through these stations of the cross. He also tells us we only need *a nakid entente* ("a naked intent") if we want an authentic walk with God. In other words, if we desire with all our heart to be close to God, that is enough. Simply reach out to the never-alooft God, and discover the truth of St. Augustine's words: "God is closer to your soul than you are yourself."

This is how the stations of the cross become second nature to us—when we begin to realize that Christ's crucifixion and resurrection were both events in history and an ongoing, mysterious truth that can be lived out in our own lives. When we see that we can go beyond our own needs and desires and start serving others and even praying for and doing good to our enemies (without becoming doormats), then the stations of the cross have seeped into the very marrow

of our souls, becoming revealed truth about the nature of our long-suffering, always faithful, all-powerful God. The stations can become our constant companions, reminders that God is intent on loving us, even though we reject him and his deep love.

The entries of this Lenten devotional book are arranged to imitate the rhythm of redemption; therefore, some of the stations have more readings than others, to emphasize certain themes. Throughout the book, the thematic motion is from darkness to light, from sin to forgiveness, from brokenness to healing, from godly sorrow to joy—with a circular rhythm that we recognize in the coming and going of the seasons. As the sun is the constant in nature, so this book's recurring call to prayer guides our souls through winter into certain springtime.

May we discover in the silence of this book what a friend we have in Jesus. May we find rest in Christ, whose experience on the dark hill of Golgotha reminds us that we have much work to do on earth, before the light of Easter may come at last. May we stop here and nurture our souls, learn to face our crosses fearlessly, trust Jesus for

the strength we need, become bridge builders, and live out his healing.

As a last reminder of the transformative *lectio divina* approach recommended for this book, before reading each of the wise devotions in it, try praying these timeless words: "We adore you, Christ our Lord, and we praise you, because through your holy cross you redeemed the world."

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Because these ancient works are meant for intelligent, spiritually hungry readers, they have been translated *sensum ex sensu* ("according to the sense"), not *verbum ex verbo* ("word for word"). This slow process means that I juggled choices of diction and syntax prayerfully while respecting the original message, to erase literalness and nurture ease of reading. This sort of translating is a kind of *scriptio divina*, a focused way of writing that can grow a writer's soul. The experience changed my life in a good way, and I am thankful for the witness of these vibrant Christians, especially for their wise words on reconciliation. I am also thankful to Christian Classics Ethereal Library (CCEL), online at <http://www.ccel.org/>, for its unparalleled resources in the Christian classics. CCEL's founder, Harry Plantinga, writes that the site's mission is to "build up the church by making classic Christian writings available and promoting their use." A word about the composite nature of some of the devotionals: sometimes this book combines different passages from one work so the thrust of that classic Christian text is presented; in these cases, ellipses have not been used. Also, unnumbered notes

at the back of the book provide more material for those who want to dig deeper into the devotionals, exploring them further, and the quoted lead-ins help readers locate their position in the text.

Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane

THE WAKING OF PRAYER

They went to a place called Gethsemane [also called the Garden of Olives]; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.” And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

—Mark 14:32–38

[The LORD God said,] “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

—Genesis 3:19

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

—Romans 13:11–12

At the first station, we find Jesus despairing. Mark tells us in his Gospel that Jesus is so upset that he throws himself on the ground and prays. Taking his spiritual agony to a quiet place, the Garden of Gethsemane at the foot of the Mount of Olives, Jesus shows us what to do when we despair—turn to God in prayer. *Despair* means “hopeless,” literally “without” (*de-*) “hope” (*sperare*). The physician Gospel writer Luke says Christ’s agony is so great that he sweats great drops of blood on the ground. This rare medical condition, hematohidrosis, is caused by terrible stress.

Why is Christ beside himself with anguish? The Son of God knows this is the night of his betrayal

and arrest. He faces crucifixion, the most painful and agonizingly slow form of physical and mental torture. He knows how weak we humans are, made of dust, for even his closest disciples are asleep; and he knows that the greatest agony of all will be accepting the suffering of humanity's sins—our heavy guilt—and that its weight will separate him from God.

See Jesus on the ground in the Garden of Olives understanding what his love is costing him. He shows us we must embrace the everyday battle that is prayer, and keep praying and never stop. The image is unforgettable: God is not distant. Christ has dirt on his knees. He knows anxiety. So we can follow him, he is praying in the garden. We must awake through prayer.

ASH WEDNESDAY MORNING

Always call on God in prayer. When dark thoughts come into our hearts, making us feel hopeless and depressed, they are sent by the devil, who is a conniving liar. He schemes against humanity and against God, hoping these negative thoughts will steal our faith in the mercy of God. We must never forget that despair cannot injure us if we do not

give in to its perverse pleasure. We must reject these negative ideas by calling out to our Lord. If you have sinned, do not lose hope because of your error. Pray instead. On the other hand, if you have done something good, never presume too much on account of your goodness. Never congratulate yourself excessively. Never look down on someone else for sinning, and remember that when the wayward soul prays and repents of doing wrong, the Lord will raise that person up, as he did Lazarus.

—Ælfric of Eynsham: *Sermons*

ASH WEDNESDAY EVENING

Many people never wake from the sleep of this world. Lust lays heavy on their eyes and in their flesh, and they abuse the gospel with their immorality. We should instead be asking, "How can I live out my faith? How does repentance transform us? What does sincere godliness require? How can we learn Christlike living?"

Imitate Christ. Shake off the sleep of sin.

Rushing after the "best" education possible, we overlook the greatest teacher, Jesus. His humility and holy living are our best text. We should sit at his feet because his life can teach us everything. Everyone wants to "serve Christ," but it is hard to find anyone who chooses to follow him. Following is costly. We must be godly, modest, prone to listening, patient with others' faults, willing to suffer, and able to love difficult people.

This is hard. Sometimes we fall asleep spiritually. We are weak, but we can work hard. We can try imitating Christ in whatever we do. We can meditate on his godly life and work to be like him in loving others. We can try walking the path he walked. We need a certain brokenness of heart, as we know: "The poor have good news brought to them."

The only thing that opens our eyes is real regret. True regret starts deep within, and then spreads out, and finally we are able to see. If we want to become new creatures in Christ, we must steep ourselves in God's Word. It must mature in us like seeds that grow, producing spiritual fruits. God's Word can restore our souls, making our Adam natures shrivel and die; and Christ will live in us. We must do more than merely know God's Word. We must live it.

The world is exploding with information, but is anyone determined to know the love of the poor and humble Christ?

—Johann Arndt: *True Christianity*

A young man visited Abba Moses for a wise word, but the Abba gave him a question instead: "Why are you here? Go home. Sit in your cell. Prayer will teach you everything."

—*Sayings of the Fathers and Mothers*

THURSDAY MORNING AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

The soul stays awake by seeing in three distinct, often overlapping ways. The first way is thinking. When the mind is thinking, though, it is easily distracted and usually less focused than during the second way, which is meditation, or when the mind is looking, caught between wonder and wisdom, waking up. The third way the soul stays awake is contemplation, when the soul is completely still, gazing on Truth.

When you are thinking, as you know, your mind is more likely to dash after every new idea popping into your head, although sometimes a long period of thinking can morph into meditation, or even into contemplation. Meditation and contemplation are superior to thinking because they desire wisdom. Contemplative prayer has the best vision of the three, penetrating this world's illusions to the reality of things, offering us epiphanies, giving us a taste of heaven. This is true prayer.

Those who quiet their souls in meditation and contemplation live with their eyes open, soaring through the day like birds. Their practice of stillness gives them wings, and they dart from here to there, sometimes hovering in midair on the unending motion of prayerful diligence. It is as if they are saying as they cling to the moment, "It is good for us to be here."

—Richard of St. Victor:

The Mystical Ark and The Four Degrees of Violent Charity
(or *The Four Degrees of Overwhelming Love*)

THURSDAY EVENING AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

We ask the very first Beginning to open our eyes through the ineffable peace of Christ. But how can our souls dialogue with God? St. Francis prayed long hours in solitary places. One day as he prayed he saw an angel and Christ, and an awesome love melted his heart. He watched the seraph fly down from heaven on its six fiery wings, and suddenly he saw the man of God, crucified, there in the middle of its shining wings. This vision awed St. Francis, making him feel sad, thankful, and amazed, and it teaches us today that the mirror of contemplative prayer can reveal God to us. So, to live a godly life, always pray. When reading, ask God for inspiration. When questioning, ask God to help you stay loyal to him. When exploring the earth's wonders, ask God to help you cherish his mystery. When you work, ask for grace. When you study, ask God to teach you how to love. When you gain understanding, pray, "God, keep me humble." If we fall on our knees, we can give God our helplessness and failures.

Offer the One who loves you your shame.

—Bonaventure: *The Soul's Journey into God*

Whoever you are, regardless of your circumstances, you can turn from the stupor of self-will and join the Lord of all if you put on the strong armor of submission and serve Christ. Pray first before doing anything. The book of Romans tells us to wake up: "It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep." Open your eyes to the clear light revealing God's path to us. Open your ears to the intimate voice of God within, calling us to love. For the Gospel of John says, "Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you."

—Benedict: *Rule*

On the darkest night, I risked everything for love.
 No one saw me, and I saw no one, quiet reigning,
 I escaped down a hidden ladder at night.
 I left my house when all was still,
 my way lit only by my yearning.

The night was sweet, and nothing could
 show my way
 through the darkness, except the inner light
 of prayer
 shining brighter than the noonday sun,

guiding me until I found myself
in the loneliest place,
where the One I love
waited for me.

I know him well.

—John of the Cross: *Ascent of Mount Carmel*

Jesus is betrayed by Judas

THE CHOICE OF OBEDIENCE

Immediately, while he [Jesus] was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. Then they laid hands on him and arrested him.
—Mark 14:43–46

[Jesus said,] "But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered

him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

—John 6:64–69

At the second station, we find Jesus betrayed by Judas. Mark tells us in his Gospel that Judas sends Jesus to his death with a kiss. A kiss is the gesture of intimacy. Can there be a crueler injury than the disloyalty of one you love? Jesus knows the humiliation of a failed relationship. He knows the surprise of being abandoned by someone trusted, for even when we know these things can happen, who is ever prepared for them?

Judas commits the ultimate sin; he is unfaithful to Christ's love. He lies to Jesus, the core of every sin. In Dante's *Inferno*, the ninth circle of hell is reserved for traitors who have had a special relationship with the person they later abandoned. Of hell's concentric circles, the ninth one is the lowest and innermost, and the worst offenders are kept frozen and distorted forever in its lake of ice known as the Cocytus, for "wailing." Dante puts Judas here, near Cain. Only Satan is farther in and lower down, at the very center of hell.

Surely, and sadly, we see ourselves in Judas. We break our promises to Jesus and to those we love. Thank God for the forgiveness offered by Christ.

FRIDAY MORNING AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Jesus said, "But among you there are some who do not believe." The Gospel writer John reminds us in this verse that our allegiance to Christ is a personal choice.

"Because of [their unbelief] many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him." John does not say that some of Christ's followers "left" Jesus but that they "turned back." He is emphasizing that they physically cut themselves off from having a relationship with Jesus, severing their ability to strengthen their souls. When they stopped associating with Jesus, they abandoned their faith.

Then Jesus asked his inner circle, the twelve disciples, "Do you also wish to go away?" Jesus did not compliment them in an effort to convince them to stay with him. Nor did he beg his disciples to stay. Instead, Jesus showed true excellence as a teacher in this moment, because he wanted their motives to be

pure. He wanted them to be drawn to his ministry, not to compliments. Christ never tries to manipulate emotions. He never tries to make us feel guilty. Nor did Jesus try to push his disciples away before any one of them could reject him. This would have separated them from him.

Instead, Jesus asked the Twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" The wording of this question is extremely important because it removes all compulsion from the listener's mind. It allows the one being asked to make a personal choice. It is a question put by someone who does not want people attached to him through any sense of shame. Jesus wants the Twelve to stay with him only for love of him. Jesus shows wisdom here. With one gentle question, he gave the disciples the opportunity to make the right choice.

Jesus chose an unusual path in this situation. Neither complimenting his disciples, nor rejecting them, he asked them a question. Jesus asks us that same question today: "Do you also wish to go away?" This question is an act of love. It does not force. It is not coercion, a compelling someone to do something. In coercion there is no real connection, while love volunteers gladly.

Peter answered Jesus: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to

believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." See how much Peter loved his Lord, so much so that he did not think only of himself as he spoke. He did not say "I know." He had his friends in mind when he said, "We know that you are the Holy One of God."

Christ is community.

—John Chrysostom: *Sermon*

FRIDAY EVENING AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Our Lord gave us laws to guide us, but we create "new" ones for ourselves, totally unlike God's. Our self-conceived directives are at cross purposes with divine teaching. We are opposing the wisdom of the ages, but we are so stubborn that our self-will rebels against everything good. Trampling God's commandments with arrogant behavior, we make our lives difficult. There is nothing worse than betraying Jesus, because this betrayal estranges us from God and destroys community.

Love God. Abandon what is wrong.

—Ælfric of Eynsham: *Sermons*

Jesus says,

Learn obedience, or you will always be running from grace. Develop a contempt for your flaws if you wish to win the spiritual war for your soul. If you are mostly concerned with what you will receive in life, you lose the benefits of community. If you cannot, for sheer stubbornness, submit to your superior, your will is rebelling against me, because when you respect the wishes of a good manager, you learn to conquer your ego. This obedience integrates your soul and helps you deal with exterior temptations; otherwise, your inner self will always be disorganized. Discipline your soul because there is no worse enemy than your own self. Have you never noticed? Work to be in harmony with God's Spirit. Abdicate your throne. Remember that you are mortal and that I am omnipotent, but became the lowliest of the low so you can vanquish your lofty pride through my humility. Learn obedience.

—Thomas à Kempis: *Imitation of Christ*

SATURDAY MORNING AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Anypbody who says, "I don't need a teacher," is arrogant. People who do not respect those who teach them in love, suffer from the worst disease of all—ignorance (the mother of arrogance). They will be taught, but unfortunately by the angels who fell from heaven, who ran from their good teachers there. Surely that path leads to misery.

God alone is the only one who needs no teacher. He has no beginning, and no one is above him. The rest of us, however, must learn. We need teachers. We are the creatures, not the Creator.

Teaching involves much more than words. Sometimes the most horrible person can be quite eloquent. Teaching is mostly about character. A cheerful outlook, an uncomplaining temperament, and a deciding to be thankful and bold—these traits teach and inspire others. If this were not so, the best teacher would never have told his disciples, as recorded in Matthew's Gospel, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart." Christ did not say, "Learn to speak as I do" or "I will train you in rhetoric," but "Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble."

Obedying Christ is neither hard nor stressful. It only upsets those who hate being taught. To be a good student of God, we must either study what we do not know, or teach the things we do understand. If you do not feel like practicing either of these disciplines, you are being foolish. To tire of learning is a sign that you are losing faith. If you love God, you will be hungry to learn more about him. Walk in the spirit of power, love, and self-discipline.

Be brave. Mature by exploring the best knowledge of all and the best subject of all—Christ. May God help you in your quest for obedience.

—Palladius: *The Lausiac History*
(from the *Letter to Lausus the Chamberlain*)

SATURDAY EVENING AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

A divine voice spoke to me, saying,

How fragile you are, Human, made of dust and grime, but I am the living Light. I make the darkness day, and I have chosen you to see great wonders, though I have humbled you on earth. You are often depressed and timid, and insecure. Because you are conscientious, you feel guilty, and chronic physical

pain has thoroughly scarred you. But the deep mysteries of God have saturated you, too, and so has humility.

When I heard this Voice, I began trying to live a godly life. The path became difficult as I questioned myself again, saying, *This is pointless*. I wanted to soar. I dreamed impossible dreams and started projects I could never finish. I became dejected, so I sat and did nothing. My self-doubt is my greatest disobedience. It makes me miserable, and I struggle with this cross daily.

But God is by my side, reminding me that he created me. So, even in the middle of my depression, I walk with wise patience over the marrow and blood of my body. I am the lion defending itself from a snake, roaring and knocking it back into its hole. I will never let myself give in to the devil's arrows.

—Hildegard of Bingen: *Scivias*

FIRST SUNDAY MORNING OF LENT

Can there be any evil greater than what we find at home? Can we hope to find peace anywhere, if we have none within us? No one, not even the closest friend or family member, is as intimate as the powers

of our soul, which seem to wage war on us as if they knew the harm our vices are inflicting on them.

That is why Jesus often said to his disciples, "Peace, peace." Believe me, if we have no peace ourselves and never work for peace at home, we will not find it in anyone else's house. By the blood which our Lord shed for us, stop this war, I beg you. Begin the work of maturity. That is true obedience. If you have already started walking the right path, do not let the battle turn you back. Remember a relapse is worse than a fall. It could ruin you.

Instead, trust in God's mercy, not in yourselves. Then you will see how his majesty leads you into the greatest happiness possible.

—Teresa of Avila: *Interior Castle*