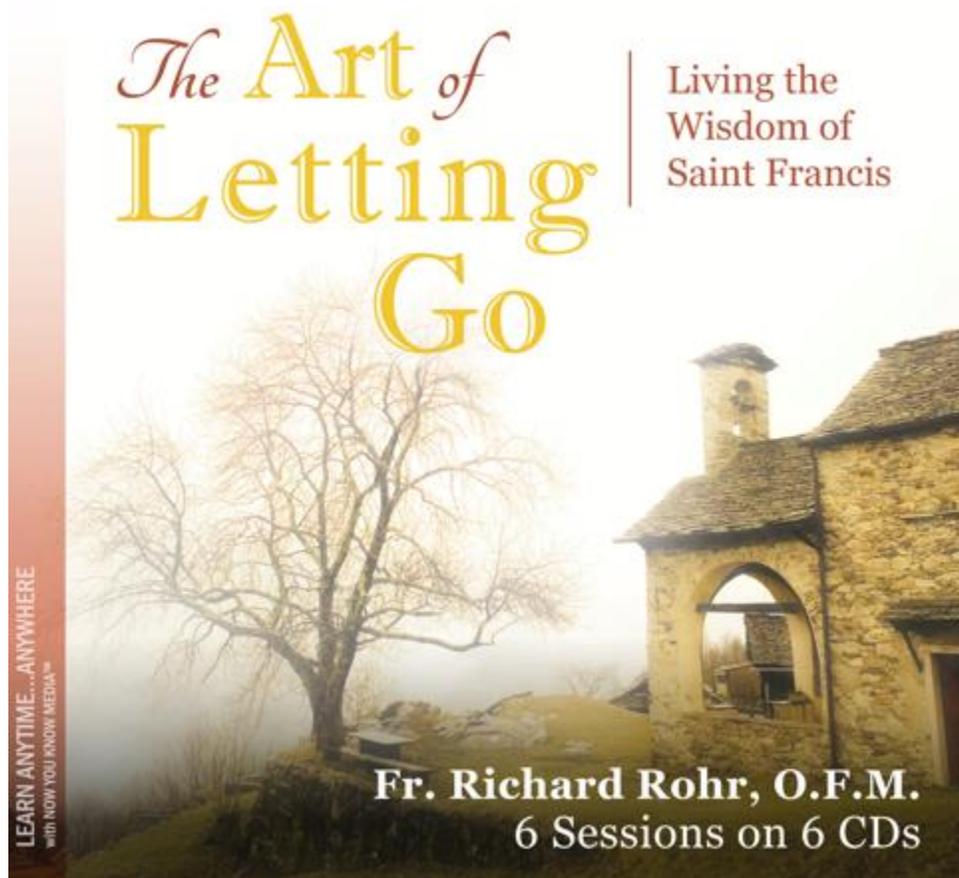

A
NOW YOU KNOW MEDIA
STUDY GUIDE

The Art of Letting Go: Living the Wisdom of Saint Francis

Presented by Fr. Richard Rohr, O.F.M.



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Richard Rohr, O.F.M., is a Franciscan priest and globally recognized ecumenical teacher, bearing witness to the awakening within Christian mysticism. He is the founding director of the Center for Action and Contemplation in his hometown of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Fr. Richard's teaching is grounded in the Franciscan alternative orthodoxy—practices of contemplation and lived kenosis (self-emptying) expressing itself in radical compassion, particularly for the socially marginalized.

Fr. Rohr is the author of more than 80 books, audio programs, and DVDs, including *Everything Belongs*, *Adam's Return*, *The Naked Now*, *Breathing Under Water*, *Falling Upward*, and *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*.

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Course Overview

Many know Saint Francis for his joyful life of love, but his single, powerful insight—that to rise, we must fall—may be his most relevant gift to ordinary people today. In *The Art of Letting Go: Living the Wisdom of Saint Francis*, Father Richard Rohr illuminates the rich layers of wisdom revealed through this simple friar's words and life to show how we can find greater connection, purpose, and joy.

In six engaging sessions, Rohr brings a firsthand knowledge of the world's spiritual practices to guide us gently into the unfolding stages of liberation discovered by Saint Francis in his own life.

You'll begin by learning to identify and let go of the possessions, beliefs, and biases that no longer bring you contentment. With this first taste of freedom, you will explore how to dwell in God's presence amidst chaos or calm and how to embrace your inner wounds and imperfections with compassion. You will discover how to “descend the tower” of the ego to commune with the natural world and others as spiritual equals.

The Franciscans call themselves “the poor brothers and sisters,” but their vow of poverty is, at heart, a commitment to simplicity that all of us can make. *The Art of Letting Go* is a guide for shedding the ambitions, certitudes, and fears that grip us, so that we may allow ourselves to be pulled toward greater freedom, joy, and spiritual unfolding.

Session 1: Inner Liberation from Ourselves

Overview

Meister Eckhart said that spirituality has much more to do with subtraction than it does with addition. In our contemporary consumer culture, religion is often a matter of addition: of obtaining more ideas, more “Brownie points” with God, and producing moral behavior. We are on an unfortunate track. Spirituality is not about getting, attaining, achieving, succeeding, all of which tend to pander to the ego. Authentic spirituality is about the wisdom of letting go. Much of this session will be spent on Francis’s historical background and how the setting in which he lived his life led him to exemplify the art of letting go. This guide is not meant only for Christians; it is meant for anyone on a search for more, anyone seeking to become more *human*.

I. A Poem

How surely gravity's law,
strong as an ocean current,
takes hold of the smallest things
and pulls them toward the heart of the world.

Each thing—
each stone, blossom, child—
is held in place.
Only we, in our arrogance,
push out beyond what we each belong to
for some empty freedom.

If we surrendered
to earth's intelligence
we could rise up rooted, like trees.

Instead we entangle ourselves
in knots of our own making
and struggle, lonely and confused.

So like children, we begin again
to learn from the things,
because they are in God's heart;
they have never left him.

This is what the things can teach us:

to fall,
patiently to trust our heaviness.
Even a bird has to do that
before he can fly.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, trans. Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy (2005)

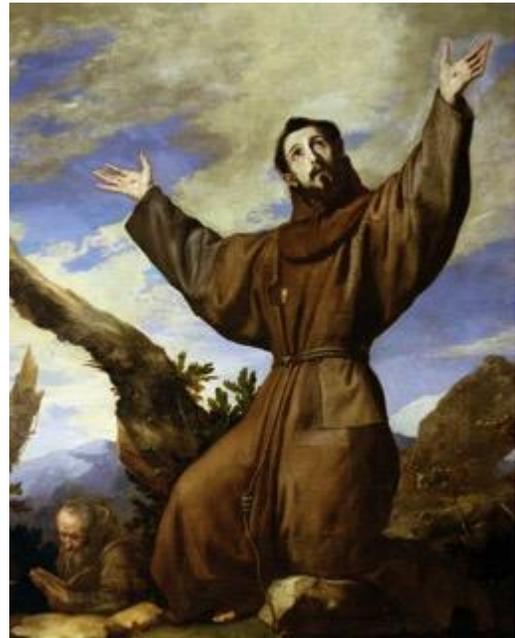
- This poem evokes many of the themes we will be unpacking throughout this program.

II. A Fear of Falling

- Saint Francis can teach us to trust our heaviness and learn how to fall. He realized that what Rilke calls “the things,” the natural world, somehow learn this more easily than human beings do. We are not naturally trained in falling.
 - 1) The first childhood fear is of falling. In some ways, that fear remains with us throughout our lives.
 - 2) Jesus taught us that the way of the Cross, the path downward, was the more trustworthy path. The path upward tends to feed the ego.
 - 3) Francis of Assisi profoundly understood the way of descent as few other Christians did.

III. The Early Life of St. Francis

- Francis was born in Assisi, Italy, in the year 1181. Europe and the Muslim world had already endured the First Crusade and the Second Crusade. Shortly after Francis’ birth, Jerusalem fell to Saladin.
- Francis grew up in a time when the world was obsessed with war.
 - 1) Pope Innocent III called for a fourth Crusade, beginning in 1202.
 - 2) There was also an ongoing war between Assisi and Perugia. Francis was taken prisoner in 1202.
 - 3) In 1204, the Christians of the West sacked Constantinople.
- Francis escaped from his imprisonment dazed, confused, and deeply hoping for more. He saw an intrinsic connection between violence and property.
 - 1) Property preoccupied his father’s life.



Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy by Jusepe de Ribera, 1639

- 2) Francis recognized that an obsession with possessions and property had destroyed his father's soul.
- 3) He sought a different path, but saw that cruelty and violence were present at every level of society.
 - (a) In his book *Francis of Assisi*, Arnaldo Fortini suggests that Francis' participation in this violence destroyed his youth.

IV. A Life of Non-Possession

- Francis concluded that the only way out of such a violent was a life of voluntary poverty or "non-possession." Members of the Franciscan Order are urged to follow Francis' example and way of life in several ways.
 - 1) According to an early biography, Francis said, "Look brothers, if we have any possessions, we will need arms to protect them, and then this will cause many disputes and lawsuits, and possessions impede the love of God and neighbor. Therefore, let us decide we do not want to possess anything in this world."
 - 2) Francis felt he had to live in close proximity with those excluded from society. Francis was born into an upper class family, but came to identify with the lower class and the excluded ones. Franciscans seek out people who have been deemed unworthy by society at large.
 - 3) He saw the beginnings of the leisure class, a segment of society that did not have to work in order to live. Franciscans are urged to work for their pay rather than become "white collar" clergy.
 - 4) Francis insisted on equal power relationships. He rejected all terms of superiority. Francis knew the violence, mistrust, and ambition that an unequal society would engender.
 - (a) In his writings, he uses the words "brother" or "sister" frequently, even extending it to nature. He loved the animal world, which revealed to him the glory of God.
 - 5) He had a unique understanding of penance. To Francis, penance wasn't dark asceticism; it was a proactive, free leap into the problem. In the opening words of his Last Will and Testament, he wrote

"The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, to begin to do penance in this way. For when I was broken, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers, and the Lord Himself led me among them, and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what before had seemed bitter to me was now turned into sweetness of soul and body. Afterwards, I waited just a little bit, and then I left the world."

- (a) Francis lived a life of penance based on the needs and the suffering of others. He knew that the primary freedom is freedom from the self. He allowed the other to be that which invited him forward. Jesus went wherever he found human pain, and Francis did the same.

v. The Changing Life of Saint Francis

- Four significant changes occurred over the course of Francis' lifetime:
 - 1) Mechanical clocks were first installed in church bell towers, marking the beginning of the measurement of time in strict increments. Though we now take it for granted, most people in most of history did not think of time in this way.
 - 2) A money economy began to replace the bartering economy. Francis told us to treat this newfound money like dung.
 - 3) People began to coalesce in small towns and cities. Even monks and abbots were accruing vast amounts of land.
 - (a) Francis said that his followers should not own anything.
 - 4) The social class system was being completely rearranged. People were constantly fighting for power and status. Arnaldo Fortini wrote that, at the time, everyone in Assisi was armed and violence was a way of life.
- Francis' worldview was a wholesale counter-cultural attack on the system:
 - 1) He created a lifestyle based on natural rhythms.
 - 2) He demanded that his followers work for their keep.
 - 3) His followers were not allowed to own anything, figuratively or literally.
 - 4) He radically changed sides, intentionally joining the underclass, and found that there was no longer any basis for conflict. Unfortunately, he had to leave his own family to do so.



St. Francis of Assisi at Prayer by Bartolome Esteban Murillo, 1645-50

VI. Religion's True Essence

- The essence of true religion is to live at the “being” level. Francis’ most constant prayer was “Who am I? And who are You?”
 - 1) Francis allowed God to be mystery, that which you never totally understand.
 - 2) Francis needed less and less to make him happy; life itself was enough.
- According to Carl Jung, the first half of life is text and the second is commentary. Little by little, as you put the pieces of life together, you forgive and let go and look back from a new perspective.

VII. The Real Purpose of Religion

- Religion helps us to grow up and to stop us from making the same mistakes. We can discover what is real and true and learn the way of love.
- Without love, we cannot find our soul’s purpose. Many religious figures recognize that, without a certain degree of inner freedom, you cannot love.
 - 1) Many people think of religion as prescriptive rather than freeing, but true religion leads us to freedom from the self.
- We need a second Copernican Revolution. We have to discover that we are not the center of any universe. This is a necessary descent.

VIII. All Great Wisdom Can Be Found

- All great religious and spiritual wisdom can be found in nature. Francis spent much of his time in nature. By observing the natural world, he saw that everything changes and everything dies. Nothing stays in the same shape or form for long.
 - 1) The natural world accepts change. Only one species resist this movement: us.
- All great spirituality is about letting go.
- Francis was known as “the joyful beggar.” He communicated happiness, freedom, humor, and joy to everyone around him.

Reflection Questions

1. Francis' life was a resistance to the system and the major changes taking place during his time. How did the setting in which Francis grew up affect his views later on? What are some historical developments that occurred in your lifetime that influenced who you are today?
2. Francis advocated a life of non-possession. Although few people are able to fully carry this out, what are some practical steps you could take to live more like Francis?
3. How did Francis' view of nature shape his outlook? What are some ways the natural world inspires you?

Session 2: Cultural Liberation from Our Biases

Overview

In our first session we learned about the life of Saint Francis and the ways in which he resisted the culture of his own time. Now, we will explore some of the characteristics of our modern commodity culture. Our society has been stricken with “affluenza” in many ways. We are never satisfied; we always find ourselves wanting more. But there are ways to resist this worldview. Francis’ way of life shows us an alternative way: a life that is not defined by possessions, but that is infinitely more abundant and freeing.

I. A Captive vs. Trivial Culture

- In the foreword to his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985), Neil Postman writes:

“We were keeping our eye on *1984*. When the year came and the prophecy didn't, thoughtful Americans sang softly in praise of themselves. The roots of liberal democracy had held. Wherever else the terror had happened, we, at least, had not been visited by Orwellian nightmares.

But we had forgotten that alongside Orwell's dark vision, there was another - slightly older, slightly less well known, equally chilling: Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Contrary to common belief even among the educated, Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy. As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny ‘failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions.’ In *1984*, Huxley added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting

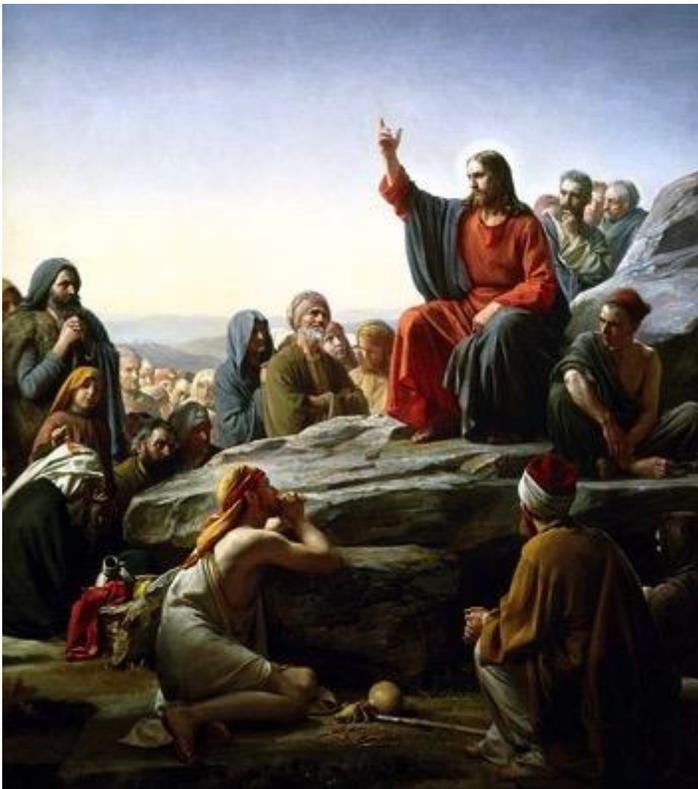
pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.

This book is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right.”

- In many cases, we are our own worst enemies, taking away our own freedom.

II. The Rise of Commodity Culture and the Fall of Personal Culture

- We have taken a commodity culture for granted, while personal culture falls by the way-side.
 - 1) In a way, we live in a world where we use people and love things.
- Jewish philosopher Martin Buber wrote of the “I-Thou” relationship and the “I-It” relationship.
 - 1) We were born for the “I-Thou” relationship, where neither side objectifies the other and both can give and receive.



The Sermon on the Mount by Carl Heinrich Bloch, 1877

2) Buber lamented that Western civilization was increasingly slipping into an “I-It,” or subject-object, relationship. All of us have been raised in this world.

(a) In its worst forms, this worldview leads to a controlling and manipulative mentality.

- There was a time where the relationships between people came first and the moment itself was its own end.
- These are two utterly different worldviews.
- In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “You cannot serve two masters. You will either hate the one and love the other or you will be loyal to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Mammon” (Matthew 6:24).

- 1) Jesus calls for an economy of grace rather than an economy of merit.

- 2) He continues: “Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, about what you will eat or what you will drink. Do not worry about your body, what you will put on it. Is not life worth so much more than food and the body so much more than clothing? Look at the birds. They neither sow nor reap, they neither gather into barns, yet their Heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of so much more value than they? And which of you by all your worrying can add one cubit to your span of life. So do not worry about your clothing. Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They neither toil nor spin, and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field which is here today and gone tomorrow, will he not so much more clothe you, you people of such little faith? So do not worry. Do not say, ‘what shall we eat, what shall we drink, what shall we wear?’ It is the pagans who worry about these things. You must seek first the reign of God and his justice and all these other things will be given you as well. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will take care of itself. Today has enough concerns of its own” (Matthew 6:25-34).

III. Experience Your Own Depth: Live in the Now

- The only way to experience your own depth is to be present to what is. We have to practice this every day, through solitude or silence. Our capacity for endless distraction takes us away from joy, freedom, and ourselves.
- In his introduction to *Muddling Toward Frugality: A New Social Logic for a Sustainable World* by Warren Johnson (2010), Edward Abbey writes:

“Mr. Johnson’s thesis can be summarized without much difficulty: after generations of extravagant and reckless industrial expansion, we are clearly entering an age of economic scarcity. While human demands continue to rise, natural resources, especially the non-renewable kind, become harder to find and more expensive to extract, process, transport and distribute. This simple brute fact is the basic cause of inflation, despite the inability of most professional economists to see it. (The “dismal science” has never been more dimly obtuse than it is today.) The law of diminishing returns is coming into effect. Technological developments can delay the process but not halt or reverse it; nor can we rely on government or big business to save us. Planning for further growth delays the adjustments that must be made... The best way to deal with the end of affluence is to accept it—not fight it—and to begin, here and now, the unavoidable adaptations, on an individual, family, and community basis. Piecemeal, experimental, and muddling.”

- Most of us aren’t like Francis; we can’t dive into a life of voluntary simplicity. But most of us can try here and there. We’re all encouraged and allowed to live in the personal form.

IV. A Closer Look at the Commodity Culture

- Commodity culture isn’t entirely bad, but our need for more comfort and more convenience seems to be endless. Things that we once saw as luxuries have come to be necessities.



Photo by Scoictho

- The symptoms of affluenza:
 - 1) Immensely swollen expectations
 - 2) Shopping fever
 - 3) Materialism
 - 4) Hypercommercialism
 - 5) Bankruptcy
 - 6) Social scars

- In this culture:
 - 1) We commodify information. Most religion today is often not based on faith, which should involve a tolerance for ambiguity. There is an absolute insistence on answers for everything. Faith has become another consumer product to be bought and sold through entertainment.
 - 2) We commodify things, priding ourselves on having the most toys at the end.
 - (a) Compare this view with that of Saint Francis, who chose poverty.
 - (b) Hope means living without resolution or total satisfaction in the present.
 - (c) Without inner abundance, the now is not enough.
 - 3) We commodify people themselves.
 - (a) The utilitarian mode: thinking of people as objects to be used.
- Without a notion of inherent value and dignity, this mode is inevitable. We all have an intrinsic meaning that cannot be provided by commodities.
 - 1) Enlightenment is an “inside job.”

v. Three Poisons: Greed, Ill Will, and Delusion

- According to Buddhism, there are three poisons that destroy everything:
 - 1) Greed:
 - (a) You cannot constantly want more and more and be happy.
 - (b) When we institutionalize greed, it becomes a virtue.
 - (c) The commodity mode tells us that having and consuming constitute our personhood.

- (i) The great religions of the world would call this sin.
- 2) Ill will:
 - (a) Ill will is an inner, negative attitude.
 - (b) Ill will is institutionalized in war. We are the center and everything outside of us, and our country, is inferior.
 - (c) As soon as you judge two things, you decide which is higher and which is lower. We assess things by comparison and competition.
 - 3) Delusion:
 - (a) Verbal communication is always dualistic, but experience, especially that of mystery, is non-dual. In the personal mode, we refrain from categorizing everything.
 - (i) Religion should teach us this different frame of mind.
 - (b) Delusion is institutionalized separateness and ignoring.
- We need something to awaken us from these poisons—this is religion’s role.

VI. Two Worldviews

- The commodity mode is the worldview of entitlement:
 - 1) This worldview always leads to an attitude of incompleteness and scarcity.
 - 2) We live in a state of competition and unhappiness, always ready for disappointment.
- The personal mode is a worldview of sufficiency, life is enough:
 - 1) This worldview is characterized by a sense of abundance that can always be called upon from within.
 - 2) The mustard seed conspiracy: all it takes is a mustard seed of faith to change your entire worldview.
 - (a) We no longer let the difficulties and disappointments of life control us.
 - (b) The worldview of sufficiency provides an excess of energy, leaving us with leftover energy to tend to the needs of others and allowing us to recognize the suffering of the world.
 - (i) We are drawing from an infinite source and living within ourselves.

VII. Moving Outside of Our Comfort Zone

- The ego is comfortable with what it is used to. Listeners are invited to move outside what they are comfortable with.

- If God is mystery, then God is always unfamiliar, beyond our comfort zone.
- According to St. Augustine, “*si comprehendis non est Deus*”: If you comprehend it, it is not God.
 - 1) We often seek a God who reflects our culture and biases. God has been enlisted on both sides of every war throughout history. If we believe Jesus, God goes wherever the suffering is, where people have been excluded and abused.
- Jesus and St. Francis did not live in the commodity culture:
 - 1) Jesus always praised the outsider and critiqued the insider.
 - 2) St. Francis was the only known European in his time to make three trips to the Muslim world. During at least two, he talked to the Sultan himself.
 - (a) Both Muslims and Christians are on the same search for God.
- All enlightenment begins with an inner awakening. This can move us away from the commodity culture to a world of reverence. Everything is imbued with dignity. This involves a complete change of consciousness or *conversion*.

Reflection Questions

1. Do you agree with Postman's conclusion that we take away our own freedom? Can you think of any manifestations of this tendency in modern society?
2. What are the symptoms of "affluenza"? Do you feel that you personally suffer from any of these symptoms in particular?
3. What are some ways that transitioning from a commodity culture to the personal mode could change one's understanding of God?

Session 3: Dogmatic Liberation from Our Certitudes

Overview

Throughout this program, we are exploring the phenomenon of “falling upward:” through loss and crisis, we move into higher states of consciousness and freedom. Ultimately, loss is not real—there is only transformation. In this session, we will explore the paradox of the Pascal Mystery and the views of another important contemplative, Thomas Merton. Merton can teach us how to discover our true selves and live in the “naked now.”

I. Loss Is Not Real, There Is Only Transformation

- The Pascal Mystery: death leads to resurrection.
 - 1) Jesus became the living image of this mystery. His crucified body transformed into the risen Christ.



The Resurrection by Sebastiano Ricci, ca. 1715–16

2) Creativity and newness of life have a cost: loss.

- Loss is perceived as an enemy or affliction, but to embrace loss is to achieve eternity: death allows us to be united with what is real.

1) To avoid all letting go is to avoid transformation.

2) As Jesus said, “Unless the grain of wheat dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24).

3) You must lose your life to find your life.

- Paradox:
 - 1) Spiritual teachers often speak in the language of paradox.

- 2) Defined simply, everything has a character of paradox or contradiction to it. If you look at something long enough, you can overcome the contradictions. Religion revels in the overcoming of this either-or thinking.

II. The Function of Radical Transformation and Liberation

- Many saints and mystic speak at great length about dying. If you read and listen closely, they are talking about dying before you die.
- 1) According to Francis, if you go through the first death, the second can do you no harm. He set out to face the death of the false self head-on.

III. Joining the Human and the Divine

- Thomas Merton was the most significant American Catholic of the twentieth century. He took the ancient tradition and explained it in modern language.
 - Merton realized that many Christians stumbled over Jesus' words, "you must lose yourself to find yourself."
- 1) Most presumed that Jesus was referring to the physical self. There is a bias against embodiment and materiality, but the divine and the human are one.
 - 2) A high percentage of Christians are really theists, avoiding Christ's real message that the human and the divine coexist in Him.
 - 3) Many Christians deny Jesus' total humanity.
 - 4) We are all a living paradox: simultaneously daughters of heaven and daughters of earth.
- For Merton, the false self is not the bad self.
 - Matter reveals spirit.

IV. The True and the False Self

- The false self:
 - 1) The external, superficial self; your personality; the exterior "I," who you think you are.
 - 2) We cannot get rid of the false self. We have to create a psychological self. God comes to us disguised as our life: "The Kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21).
 - 3) Our false self is the raw material for our life.
 - 4) At some point, an event will come along that disappoints your false self, and your "personal salvation project" has to fail you. Otherwise, you will keep defining yourself by externalities.

- The true self:
 - 1) Who you have always been and always will be; the metaphysical self that has existed since your conception.
 - 2) The true self is not created, but surrendered to. If you are not practiced in letting go, you cannot discover your true self.
 - (a) We think we are what we have created, but we are always more than that: our divine DNA, beyond observation and reflection.
 - 3) This moment of discovery mirrors Jacob’s vision: “You were here all the time and I never knew it.” (Genesis 28:16)
 - (a) It is a moment of “radical grace.”
 - (b) The best way to achieve this moment is to retreat into nature, solitude, and silence for a time.
- Francis spent his entire life moving into the true self, the “really real.”

v. How to Die Before You Die

- Merton wrote, “One thing’s sure about heaven—there won’t be much of *you* there.”
 - 1) Spirituality teaches us how to die before we die, to practice heaven now.
- Religion talks primarily about the “naked now.” When we learn to accept that, we discover that there is nothing that cannot lead us to God.
- The greatest disservice done to the teaching of Jesus was transforming the gospel into a reward-punishment system at the end of life.
 - 1) The gospel was no longer a transformational system for this world.
 - 2) The false self is easily offended.
- Holiness is about collapsing into your absolute identity.
 - 1) After discovering the true self, the seductions of the false self are less alluring.

VI. Belief Systems Instead of Transformational Systems

- Much of Western civilization lives almost entirely out of the false self.
 - 1) Judeo-Christianity has created meaning for the separate self: We have belief systems instead of transformational systems.
 - 2) We have failed at dealing with the exceptions: we have rejected, persecuted, and oppressed people outside of the norm.

- 3) Only the true self is endlessly and forever capable of love. The false self cannot forgive enemies.
 - (a) Thus, Christianity has often not been a bridge-building religion. Instead, many Christians have focused on building boundaries.



Pentecost by Jean Restout, 1732

- The discovery of the true self and transformative religion is the key to rectifying the ills of Western civilization.
- “Let it be done unto me” (Luke 1:38).
 - 1) The spiritual journey is more about letting go than about any achievement or performance.

VII. The Great Truth: The True Self Is Hidden Within

- The true self, the soul, the indwelling Holy Spirit came with your DNA. We are all inherently children of God.
- The story of the Pentecost in the Acts of the Apostles contains the longest list of nations and languages in the Bible. The Holy Spirit descended upon all the peoples.
- Although we sometimes prefer to think of God as external to ourselves, the Holy Spirit was described as the indwelling presence of God.

- The false self is the great illusion that must be undercut and recognized as only a part of the whole.
- Salvation is living in conscious, loving union with God. We can achieve it here and now.
 - 1) Pope John Paul II once said that heaven and hell are not geographic places: they are states of consciousness.

VIII. Recognizing the True Self

- If we can recognize our false self by our readiness to take offense, then how do we recognize our true self?
 - 1) Put simply, the true self does the opposite. The true self understands what lasts and who we really are. It becomes a place that we can always return to.
 - 2) Dom Helder Camara, Holy Archbishop of Recife Brazil, was known for taking care of the poor in his community. When the next Archbishop undid all of his work, he showed no anger or cynicism. Instead, he let go of it, trusting in God's will.
 - (a) Smaller historical truths cannot defeat the saints and mystics.
- The big picture is the Kingdom of God.
 - 1) The true self can only hold onto identities such as religion and nationality to a small degree; they are only one part of us.
- Prayer:
 - 1) The relative identity tends to perform prayers as an obligation. At the level of the false self, prayer is practical and functional.
 - 2) The true self *is* prayer. Everything is done in conscious union with God.
 - (a) The true self prays *through* God, not *to* God.
 - (b) Paul said that we must pray always. If done in conscious union with God, even your most secular occupations are sacred.

Reflection Questions

1. Reflect on the Pascal Mystery. What can it teach us about the art of letting go?
2. In what ways do Thomas Merton and St. Francis' philosophies overlap? In what ways do they differ?
3. Much of the history of Western civilization has been spent living in the false self. In what ways would the world look different if more people lived their true selves?

Session 4: Personal Liberation from the System

Overview

The art of letting go does not come naturally; it takes practice. What comes most naturally is something that most humans have to make an effort to understand. Our default way of thinking is inherently dualistic, based on comparison and competition. This mode of thought is indeed practical in everyday life, but it severely limits us when it comes to our understanding of things like God, love, and spirituality. Both Jesus and Francis approached the world with a non-dual outlook. By emulating this worldview, we can begin to allow ourselves to fall into the mystery of God.

I. The Art of Letting Go Lets Us Truly Live

- Francis and early friars had a different way of approaching the moment. They were, in the truest sense, contemplatives.
- The whole universe has had to learn about loss and death.
 - 1) Everything is constantly transforming into different states. What looks like dying is also living at another level.
 - 2) Any sense of self-sufficiency is an illusion. We are all part of this great ecology.
- The art of letting go can be practiced through meditation and contemplation. Religion discovered that the ordinary/dualistic mind with which we approach the everyday is inadequate when trying to understand big issues like love, death, suffering, God, and eternity.
 - 1) We are trained to think using a binary system.
 - 2) In the last 500 years or so, we have come to see words as reality itself. But we cannot substitute words for experience.

II. Understanding the Dualistic Mind

- The dualistic mind is necessary for ordinary decisions and thinking. This mind is good and necessary, but it cannot deal with big, abstract matters.
- We have to practice thinking in a different way, where we don't eliminate anything we don't understand as wrong. This is a major exercise in letting go.
- In many ways, it is much harder to hold onto joy and happiness than shame and offense.

- 1) In contemplation, you experience the “stable witness,” the Holy Spirit of God.
- In his gospel, John used the word “paraclete” to describe the Holy Spirit. A paraclete is a defender or advocate.
- You must suffer necessary humiliation by recognizing your negative thoughts before you can transform.
- The dualistic mind moves toward closure and judgment. In contemplation, the first lens through which you receive the moment has to be non-dual.
 - 1) War and conflict are justified by the judgments of the dualistic mind. The unconverted ego has picked and chosen from sacred scriptures and twisted their words into whatever it wants.

III. How You See Anything Is How You See Everything

- The contemplative wants the good and the true and the beautiful so much that they dare to leave the field of the moment open and refuse to categorize it.
 - 1) If you cannot recognize how many of your thoughts are defensive, oppositional, and self-referential, you will have no motivation to let go.
 - 2) This process can take years. In early stages, contemplation is all about practicing dying.
- Opinions are those ideas that you wrap yourself around. We become dependent upon them. They can become our identity.
 - 1) If we remain at this level of understanding, religion has not been doing its job.

IV. Capability for Love Within the Non-Dualistic Mind

- Jesus was the first clear, non-dual thinker in the Western world.
 - 1) Throughout our history, his life and teachings have been interpreted primarily by dualistic thinkers.
 - 2) An exception to this type of interpretation can be found in the teachings of the early Desert Fathers and Mothers. Their writings and stories undercut the false self.
- Celtic Christianity, which diverged from Greco-Roman thinking, arose from Ireland with its own strain of saints and scholars.

- 1) Celtic spirituality is nature-based and non-dual. It is more about love and being in communion.
- Dualistic thinking on its own prevents us from growing and exploring new ideas. If you are never surprised by wonder, never experience great love or great suffering, you can avoid contemplative thinking entirely.



- Christians were separated into a class system: laity and clergy.
 - 1) Among monks and nuns, non-dual thinking was taught systematically as late as the 13th century.
- Since the sixteenth century we have had no large-scale, systematic teaching of contemplation, even in the monasteries.
- Franciscans followed Francis' rhythm of contemplation *and* action.
 - 1) A non-dualistic life where everything is sacred and everything is prayer.

v. Refuse the Temptation to Find Contrary Evidence

- Dividing the field of the moment is a self-cancelling system.
 - 1) Saying “but” instead of “and” can lead to an endless cycle of debate.
 - 2) The contemplative refuses the temptation to present contrary evidence and instead leaves the field open and builds on whatever truth they've been presented with. When you let go of your own offended ego and need to be right, you can better withstand attacks.
 - (a) Knee-jerk reactions and defensiveness cannot move us forward. If we love and accept the 10 percent of truth, we can grow.

VI. Honoring the Divine Image in Everything

- The word “non-violence” did not exist in Western languages until recently. Greco-Roman thinking triumphed with dualistic thinking.
 - 1) For 500 years, Western Christianity has continued to divide. If we cannot talk to one another, what hope do we have for reconciling with the rest of the world?
 - 2) Most of our history has been focused on changing and converting other people rather than looking inward. We took Jesus' non-dual mind and turned it into a dualistic mind.

(a) “My Father’s sun shines on the good and the bad. His rain falls on the just and the unjust” (Matthew 5:45).

- Like Jesus, Francis had a non-dual worldview. He went toward outsiders. The one who is not like us holds the gift for the unfolding of our own truth.
 - 1) Build bridges, not boundaries.

VII. The Older, Contemplative Mind

- Thomas Merton almost singlehandedly pulled back the veil and helped Western Christianity recognize that it no longer understood the older contemplative mind.
- The contemplative mind recognized that the dualistic mind can only process past and future.
 - 1) Religion came to protect the status quo and revel in the good old days.



Saint Francis in the Desert by Giovanni Bellini, ca. 1480

2) Others are preoccupied with planning for the future.

3) The contemplative mind is neither liberal nor conservative. According to Richard of St. Victor of the 11th century, there is a third eye that does not read the moment in terms of either/or. Instead, it reads in terms of both/and. It stays open even in hell.

(a) Contemplatives can stay positive even in the face of overwhelming negativity.

VIII. Learning How to Live in the Naked Now

- Contemplation can be difficult even after years of practice.
 - 1) The world of naked being, devoid of judgment, can feel like emptiness.
 - 2) Once you become practiced at letting go, you will live in a broader field.
- This nothingness or emptiness is the doorway to everything. It opens up room for the other, for mystery, and for God.

ix. Falling into the Mystery: The Beginning of Spirituality

- German Jesuit Karl Rahner said that the spiritual journey moves forward on two parallel paths simultaneously. Little by little, we discover and accept the mystery that we are to ourselves.
 - 1) When we can accept and surrender to this mystery, we fall into the mystery of God.
 - (a) We cannot hold ourselves up: we have to let someone else hold us. This is the beginning of true spirituality.
 - 2) When we can allow God to keep revealing the deeper mystery of mercy and grace without categorizing God, we learn that God is love.
- Love is one, an endless sea that we fall into. All you can do is let go.

Reflection Questions

1. In our everyday state, we tend towards binary thinking. Think of events or relationships that you have approached in that way. How might you have understood them differently if you approached them with a non-dual mind?
2. Throughout history, much of Jesus' thinking has been interpreted by dualistic minds. Can you think of any examples of interpretations of Jesus' teaching that came out of this mind? Can you think of examples that came from a non-dualistic mind?
3. The contemplative mind is neither liberal nor conservative. Why? In what ways do liberals and conservatives both fall prey to dualistic thinking?

Session 5: Spiritual Liberation from the Divine

Overview

Francis took a counter-intuitive and joyful approach to inner and outer liberation. Francis' lifestyle itself was a critique of the system. It was a life that lived in the presence of "what is." In this session, we will explore the art of falling upward as a process of spiritual liberation. Spiritual growth can be charted in nine stages. Each stage has its own seductions. Most people never progress past stage three. But by following the example of Francis and other spiritual role models, we can continue on our spiritual journeys and practice the art of letting go.

I. Two Major Approaches to Spirituality

- Francis did not shield himself from suffering.
 - 1) Death belonged to life.
 - 2) Francis dove into poverty and failure. He did not try to remain innocent or unwounded.
- There are two major approaches to spirituality and conversion:
 - 1) We can try to exclude and triumph over the negative or wounded parts: this leads us to a kind of heroic spirituality based on willpower and the achievement of perfection. This always involved pretending to a certain degree.
 - 2) Francis' spirituality involved integrating the negative and accepting the woundedness of life.
 - (a) This took the form of mendicancy. Francis thought that to understand the heart, one has to relinquish control and take the side of the receiver at some point.

II. Charting the Stages of Growth

- This set Francis up for a pattern of ongoing growth and realization.
- In the last hundred years, people have come to recognize that we have to chart the stages of growth.
 - 1) Teresa of Ávila charted these stages as "Mansions" in her *Interior Castle*.
 - 2) In the past century, many psychologists and contemporary thinkers have presented a theory of stages of growth.

- Psychology and spirituality come together with stages of development and agree on several points.
 - 1) At stage two, the most you can stretch yourself to understand is a stage three person. People at the higher are incomprehensible; they look heretical and dangerous.
 - 2) People often move from stage to stage through some form of wounding or darkness. Life as it has been arranged stops working and they have to reach higher levels. You have to go through a period of unknowing before moving to the higher stages.
 - (a) The notion of biblical faith is living with a certain degree of darkness and mystery.
 - (b) Grace itself expands the heart, opens the mind, and allows us to move to a new place.
 - (c) We need someone to guide us through these periods of confusion.



III. Stages One and Two: Body and Action

- Stage One: My body is who I am.
 - 1) This leads to the basic pleasure principle: the desire for pleasure and physical security dominate. What is moral is the same as what makes us feel secure.
 - 2) As you move to greater depths, you continue to understand earlier stages. Higher thinking is *inclusive*.
- Stage Two: my external behavior is who I am.
 - 1) Much of Jesus' thinking is most critical of this level. Since time immemorial, most of history has remained at this level.
 - 2) Outward rituals and behaviors dominate stage two. Looking good on the outside is the main concern. Individuals at stage two become practiced at hiding contrary evidence.
 - 3) This is the birth of the shadow self, the self of your denied motives.
 - (a) Jesus said that his followers should not pray in public. (Matthew 6:5).
 - (b) At stage two, you can become so practiced at pretending that your real self is hidden from you. You deny your own dark side, and you exclude or torture that of others.

(c) War is attractive and power is a primary focus. Far right-wing thinking largely proceeds from stage two. It is a black-and-white, win-lose worldview.

- Stage two religion depends upon loyalty symbols and boundary markers.
- Eventually, your own group will end up disappointing you. This is the beginning of integrating the negative.

IV. Stage Three: Emotion

- Stage Three: my thoughts and feelings are who I am.
 - 1) Some initial education has taken place.
 - 2) This stage is more common in early liberalism. Your views are still self-referential. Education often serves as a substitute for actual transformation. You still can't allow your own ego to be undercut.
 - 3) You believe that your thoughts and feelings are the truth.
 - 4) If stage two creates groups, stage three creates individuals.
 - (a) It is difficult to create groups at this level. Stage three individuals cannot come together for the sake of the common good and have trouble moving beyond their own comfort zone.
- The biggest “letting go” of all takes place in the transition between stage three and stage four. This is why most people remain at stage three.
 - 1) Only with great love or suffering involving a major shock to the ego can one move on to stage four.
 - 2) Initiation was programmed to push people into the beginnings of stage four. From then on, progress is less difficult.

V. Stage Four: Intuition

- Stage Four: My deeper intuition is who I am.
 - 1) You move beyond utter reliance on rational thinking and into early stages of the contemplative mind.
 - 2) Stage four involves an early encounter with paradox and mystery. You begin to discover the deeper meaning of things. This is the discovery of soul.
 - 3) Stage four individuals can tolerate solitude and silence.



Demonstrator offering a flower to an officer (1967).
Photo courtesy of National Archives

4) Stage four can be so enchanting that many people choose to remain there. This can lead to a sense of entitlement and superiority: inner work becomes a substitute for any real encounter with otherness.

(a) Remaining at one stage for too long can cause people to regress. For example, in the 1960s, there was a cultural movement into level four. Society began to develop the ability to integrate the negative and discover deeper meaning.

Unfortunately, this awakening was short-lived, and many people from that generation regressed back to stages two and three, ultimately failing to follow through with important social and spiritual work.

VI. Stages Five, Six, and Seven: Encounter with Darkness

- Stage Five: my shadow self is who I am.
 - 1) This is what John of the Cross would refer to as the “night of the senses,” where you meet your raw, unvarnished self and begin to deal with your own phoniness.
 - 2) You have to encounter your darkest thoughts and motives.
 - 3) Without radical grace, being loved in your unworthiness, your journey cannot continue. You have to discover God’s unconditional, unearned love.
 - 4) Very few institutions are capable of this kind of self-critical thinking.
- Stage six: I am empty and powerless.
 - 1) Almost any attempt to save yourself by superior behavior, techniques, or religious devotion will fail and lead to regression. All that you can do is wait and ask and trust. Some event, relationship, or suffering has to lead you to the edge of your own resources such that you cannot fix it by yourself. Only at that point do you learn to draw from a deeper source.
 - 2) Stage Six is the movement from religion to spirituality, a moment of radical confusion.
 - 3) The essence of stage six is accepting that *I* cannot overcome certain obstacles on my own.



The Conversion of Saint Paul by Luca Giordano, 1690

- (a) “I live no longer, not I, but I live in Christ and Christ lives in me.” (Galatians 2:20)
- (b) The sense of self is transformed.
- Stage Seven: I am so much more than I thought I was.
 - 1) The false self has died and the true self has begun to take over. In the early years, this can feel like emptiness, but it is a tolerable emptiness.
 - 2) You begin to act for the sake of the action itself, even if there is no social reward or payoff.
 - 3) This is the dark night of faith.

VII. Stages Eight and Nine: Meeting the Formless

- Stage Eight: I and the Father are one.
 - 1) No one is in stage eight all the time. Everyone has their moments of fault and anger.
 - 2) Unitive consciousness: you are living in loving communion with God.
 - 3) “One knows God in oneself, and knows oneself in God.” – Teresa of Ávila
 - (a) Every other aspect of your persona is seen as a passing form. You are now ready for death; you have found your soul and no longer need to protect your external self.

- Stage Nine: I am who I am.
 - 1) Stage nine involves letting go of any attachment to your own superiority.
 - 2) The holy fool: it is enough to be human. God loves me even with my mistakes.
 - 3) You are no longer tied to the belief that yours is the only true religion: you are aware of God in all things. You are wary of any religion tied to mere forms because you have met the formless.
 - 4) You still don't throw out any of the previous stages, but recognize them as steps along the way rather than the final destination.
 - 5) Once Francis met the love of God, there was no need for pretense or pretend.

VIII. Become Child-Like

- “It is those who become like little children who will enter the Kingdom of God.” (Matthew 18:3)
 - 1) In his frequent allusions to children, Jesus was, in his own way, describing stage nine.
- If you don't learn the art of letting go, you will never move into spiritual consciousness or encounter the other. The goal of true religion is to push people deeper into faith and darkness.
- Everyone moves at their own pace and learns at their own level. We have to accept and forgive people at earlier stages in their spiritual journeys.

Reflection Questions

1. What are the two major approaches to spirituality? What are some examples of each? Which approach have you been taking?
2. Reflect on the stages of growth. What stage have you reached? Have you ever regressed? What steps could you take to move on to the next stage?
3. Have you ever encountered someone you felt had reached the final stage? What are some characteristics that made you feel that way?

Session 6: Liberation into Mystery

Overview

This program is meant to serve as an invitation to listeners to practice the art of letting go. Those of us in the developed world have been trained in power and performance, but we need to learn a spirituality of imperfection. We do not come to God by insisting on order or perfection. Jesus and Francis both found God in disorder and in imperfection. They teach us to embrace change and mystery as inevitable and necessary aspects of life.

I. The Courage to Let Go and Live in Abundance

- We should contemplate the paradox of the Christ mystery: Jesus appeared to be losing by every criterion, but he brought redemption to the world. What looked like falling was in fact rising.
 - 1) We often interpret the gospel as a vision of ascent.
- Life is a spiral, not a straight line. We don't move along the stages of spirituality in a linear fashion.
- Letting go is not losing; it is accessing a deeper, broader sense of the self. There is a part of you that has always loved God. You have to fall into what is already there and realize that you are drawing upon a deeper abundance.

II. Real Life

- When is the real life?
 - 1) The modern materialist would say that the good life is now.
 - 2) Many religious people believe that the real life is later, after death.



*St. Francis Consoled by Angelic Music by Guido Reni,
ca. 1605–1610*

- (a) This has disempowered Jesus' teaching more than anything else. Once his Good News became a reward-punishment system rather than a transformational system, Christianity moved from a religion of letting go to a religion of holding on and protecting the status quo.
- Christianity has become a religion of moral minimums, asking little of ourselves while asking a lot of others.
 - 1) *Metanoia* (often translated as "repent"): change your mind.
 - (a) Christianity began with a call to change, yet it has been impervious and resistant to change.
- Healthy religion tells us that the real life is both now and later. Religion is always calling us into change and deeper transformation.
 - 1) If you do not transform your pain, you will always transmit it. If you are not trained in letting go of suffering, you pass it on to others.

III. The Hurts of Life: How to Use the Pain

- The hurts and disappointments of life accumulate as you get older. If you don't have a practical way of moving on and letting go, the pain can take over.
 - 1) Healthy religion teaches what to do with your pain. The art of letting go is also the art of survival.
 - 2) You have to resolve to pass on life, rather than pain.
 - 1) We are in heaven by letting go and submitting to a deeper reality. We are in hell by wrapping ourselves in our hurts and attaching ourselves to our fears.
 - 2) Why is it so much easier to identify with the negative? It gives us power and control.
 - 3) Two-thirds of Jesus' teachings are about forgiveness.
 - 4) We have to learn to keep our hearts open even in hell.
- God gave us a way to prevent our pain from destroying us: letting go.
- Jesus told us to love one another. The law can be summed up in the two great commandments: to love God and to love your neighbor.
- The gospel is win-win.

IV. Our Pain Leads Us to God

- The spirituality of folly and imperfection: we don't come to God by doing things right, we come to God through failure. Our pain, more than anything else, leads us to God.

- 1) There is a wounded part inside of all of us.
 - 2) In initiation ceremonies throughout the world, boys are taught suffering and powerlessness before they come men. Everything pivots on how the boy deals with pain. If he could find God in his wound, he was considered an initiated man.
 - (a) Jesus' wounds are sacred and transformative. They do not make him bitter. Instead, he asks God to forgive.
- Jesus assumes that human beings will make mistakes and hurt one another. His is a spirituality of healing and reconciliation.
 - A message of attainment or superiority appeals to our instinct to want to be better than everyone else. The win-win scenario involves a leveling of the playing field.
 - 1) We come to God by doing it wrong.
 - 2) We come to truth through loss of innocence.

v. Seeing Things for What They Are

- Letting go is different from denying or repressing.
 - 1) The denied, rejected, repressed parts of ourselves must be seen for what they are.
 - 2) The religious word for letting go is “forgiveness.”
 - 3) You have to see your dark side.
- The mode of weeping is different than fixing or understanding. Francis wept in the cave because he had let go of the need for justification or understanding.
 - 1) Forgiving is a different mode of being.
 - 2) Jesus' prerequisite for being forgiven by God is forgiving one another.

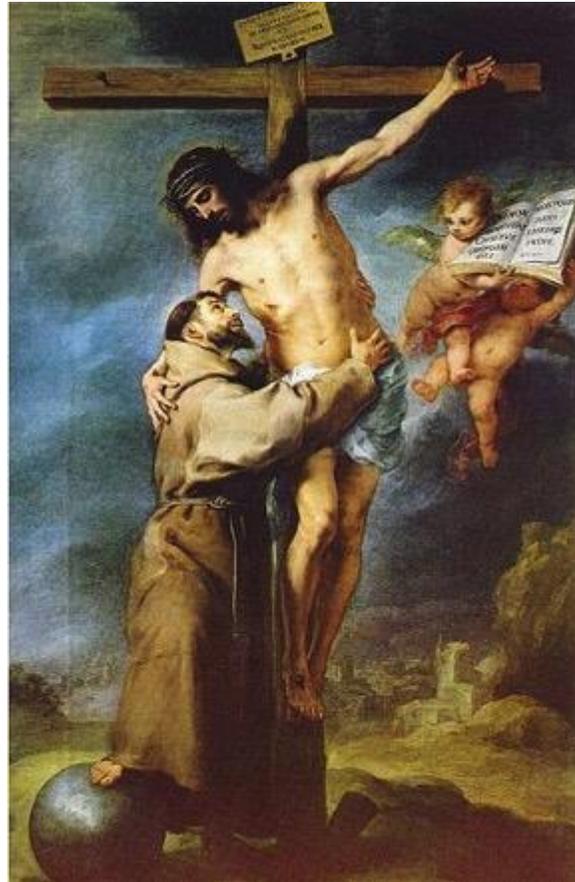
VI. The Welcoming Prayer: A Practice for Letting Go

- Penance: a preemptive dive into the problem.
- Jesus tells three different parables of losing and finding, all ending with a great celebration. An object is lost, found, and the last state is better than the first.
- The welcoming prayer:
 - 1) Identify someone who caused pain in your life.
 - 2) Feel the hurt that they caused you in your body.
 - 3) Welcome the grief and the anger. Resist the urge to blame or analyze. Dive into the pain and let go of oppositional energy.

- 4) When you have stopped resisting the pain, you will be led into a broad and spacious place where you can feel the pain of the whole world. This is what it means to be human.
 - 5) Hand the hurt over to God and ask for forgiveness.
- In forgiveness, you change your investment in your own painful story. It is one of the most radically freeing things that human beings can do, coming from a deep place of inner awareness.
 - Forgiveness reveals:
 - 1) The absolute goodness of God.
 - 2) The goodness of the one you choose to forgive.
 - 3) Your own goodness.

VII. Taking the Risk of Letting Go

- The practice of letting go is not attained by willpower or intellect. On some level it will always feel like losing or dying, but you can only learn that after the fact.
- Each time we let go, we find ourselves in a deeper union and a greater joy.
- “What have I ever lost by dying?” –Rumi
- “Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46).



Saint Francis Embracing the Crucified Christ by Bartolome Esteban Murillo, 1668

Reflection Questions

1. How does translating *metanoia* as “change your mind” rather than “repent” affect your interpretation of the gospels?
2. Have you ever forgiven someone who wronged you? How did it make you feel?
3. Perform the welcoming prayer and reflect on your experience. Was it pleasant? Painful? Relieving?

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