

# **The Will to Love Spiritual Audit Handbook**

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# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	3
Part I – A secular view of human life .....	4
We are physical, sensual, and intellectual .....	4
We are weak and become unhealthy and wounded .....	4
We can be healed .....	5
Part II – A Christian perspective .....	7
Some Differences between ACT and Christian theology .....	7
We are physical, sensual, intellectual, and spiritual .....	7
We were created to be one with God .....	8
The Gift that was to be Inherited .....	8
The Lost Inheritance .....	9
We are weak and become unhealthy and wounded in even more ways .....	10
A Visual Summary of Original Justice and Sin.....	11
We can still be healed .....	12
Natural means of healing.....	12
Restoring sanctifying grace .....	12
Restoring Integrity .....	14
Part III – Exercising the Will towards Christian Values .....	15
Exercising the Will in the Present Moment .....	15
The Cycle .....	17
The Seven Stages of the Spiritual Life .....	18
Part IV –Introduction to the Spiritual Audit.....	19
What is it?.....	19
Who is God?.....	22
1. God is beyond understanding, but we grow in understanding God through a relationship with God. ....	22
2. God is a being who is love.....	22
3. God wants us to be love too.....	23
4. God acts first by seeking us out .....	23
5. God wants us to let Him transform us. ....	24
Prayer – The First Value .....	26
Prayer - Questions .....	29

## Introduction

Welcome to the Will to Love, a unique Catholic program meant to help transform your life in Christ. This Handbook starts with an in-depth overview (Parts I and II) of our approach to understanding growth in the Catholic spiritual life. Depending on your interest in the intellectual side of things, you might find it interesting to read this Handbook in its entirety. However, you could choose to skip certain sections based on what you would like to know more about – or go straight to the exercise modules (Parts III and IV), followed by its accompanying workbooks. For those very interested in the academic pieces, including sources and citations, a further developed book is forthcoming.

The Will to Love is a modern application of Catholic ascetical and mystical theology to promote union with God by letting Him lead your will (especially tapping our 15th century Spanish mystics – St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila). To help, this is placed in a framework of behavioral change from modern psychology (specifically Acceptance and Commitment Therapy or ACT). Our primary purpose is to promote spiritual development utilizing the skills of ACT, or in other words, to promote behavioral change in line with Catholic values. We want to help you leverage evidence-based, modern psychological science for spiritual growth. You may find mental health benefits along the way.

Part I of the Handbook is a summary of the interior life of humans from a secular perspective, including what it means to live a fulfilling, meaningful life, to be weak, unhealthy, and wounded, and to heal. While using ACT as a basis, we are looking through the lens of Catholic theology. This lens lets us more clearly point out the overlap with and distinctions from with ACT in part two of this presentation. Part II adds a Christian perspective to the human being, and what it means to live life as a Christian, to be weak, unhealthy, and wounded, and how to heal.

This perspective in turn leads to an explanation, in Part III, of how the spiritual life of a Christian involves learning to exercise the will, in cooperation with God's grace, towards values that reflect the quality of loving God, self, and neighbor in a variety of circumstances. The cycles and stages of the spiritual life also are explained.

With this background, the “spiritual audit” is introduced, along with the first two steps of beginning the spiritual life: answering the question, “Who is God?”, and beginning a life of prayer.

# Part I – A secular view of human life

## We are physical, sensual, and intellectual

From philosophers as far back as Aristotle, through the modern psychological and biological sciences, it has been recognized that human beings are a composite of different kinds of life: physical, sensual, and intellectual. The physical part of us is concerned with growth and reproduction, while the sensual part responds to its environment to survive, seek pleasure, and avoid pain. This sensual part includes our senses, emotions and feelings, and thoughts, memories, and imaginations. The intellectual part includes our reason and will, which tend to guide our actions toward a natural good, such as general happiness and our social connections.

Both ancient philosophy and modern psychology recognize that integration of these three kinds of life is not just essential to healthy living, but critical for survival. In fact, our reason and will relies upon our senses, emotions, feelings, thoughts, memories, and imagination, which function through our physical body, to know and understand our physical and social environments. Therefore, they all must function as a cohesive whole – with our intellectual life governing both our sensual life and physical life.

## We are weak and become unhealthy and wounded

All humans struggle to be a cohesive whole. One of the challenges is that all humans are hardwired, in their physical and sensual parts, to avoid pain, seek pleasure, and adapt to events and environments for survival. In fact, some of our actions, like our reflexes, are hardwired to protect us without involving our reason and will – like pulling our hand away from a hot stove. Also, since avoiding pain, seeking pleasure, and adaptation often are good for survival, our reason and will tend to acknowledge this good and interfere only when some other good is involved.

But, if our desires are unchecked by our reason and will, embracing our desires tends to lead us to make decisions based on immediate gratification rather than long-term fulfillment of what we value. At the extreme, when our desires completely dominate our actions, we lose control over our decisions, leading to disintegration of the person and our social relationships. Without proper guidance from our reason and will, we become slaves to our senses, emotions, and feelings, and to our thoughts, memories, and imaginations, which leads to unhealthiness, woundedness, and broken relationships.

This disintegration can happen in several ways. For some, the ability to objectively monitor our physical and sensual parts, and to act independently of them using our reason and will, is not well-developed. For others, a traumatic event has impacted how they respond to certain stimuli. For yet others, the bodily response to some stimulus is so strong that it develops into an addiction.

Also, and commonly, disintegration happens because we are *adaptive* people. In response to various good and bad experiences in our lives, our bodies naturally develop strategies to avoid the pain and seek pleasure. We develop thoughts about ourselves and others that drive how we see the world, and thus how we respond to it. We develop patterns of behavior that we rely on, bypassing our will to act. We get lost in the past by focusing on our memories, or in the future by imagining things that are not happening to us, instead of living in the present moment. We may become afraid of looking at ourselves to figure out why we are unhealthy and wounded.

In the absence of extremes, when our problems are overt, there are two significant signs of being unhealthy and wounded.

First, outcomes of our actions are contrary to what we claim is important to us. This might be because we might not have taken the time to decide what really is important to us. The absence of clear thought about what we value makes it difficult to decide to act toward that value. What is actually important to us might be different from what we claim.

Second, we are merely reacting to the world, and not deciding how to act. This condition develops over time. The more we encounter experiences that test our ability to decide to take actions towards what we value over what we desire, our wills become wearied and we give in to our desires. The more we give in, the more our wills are weakened. If we don't like how we are behaving, yet continue to engage in the same behaviors because our wills are tired and weak, we feel tormented. We are tormented because we do not like who we are but feel too weak to do anything about it. At some point, after surrendering our wills so often, and tiring of the torment, we become blind to what we are doing.

## We can be healed

Whether our unhealthiness or woundedness is due to skill deficiencies, trauma, addiction, or maladaptive habits, we generally don't look for ways to heal until we, or our social circle, experience enough discomfort due to the outcomes of our behavior. Healing typically doesn't happen until we recognize the need for, and desire, change.

Once we are ready to change, there are a variety of therapeutic methods at our disposal from psychology and medicine. We have chosen to focus on the framework of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) because of what we see as its compatibility with Catholicism in terms of a view of human nature, health, illness, and change. In ACT, leading a healthy life starts with defining our values in service of a life of meaning. These values are freely chosen by us, and provide general, positive direction for our behaviors. These values guide all our actions towards qualities of behavior that we want to exhibit in our lives. Given our values, we learn to choose to make committed actions that lead us toward our values.

In ACT, health also is defined as staying present to our interior lives, including our senses, emotions, feelings, thoughts, memories, and imaginations. We understand these are important to our humanity, and that they give us connection to the world, others, and ourselves. But we also understand that in this connection we can experience distress or

suffering, because the world is not perfect (nor are we or others). Also, we understand that our interior lives represent our perception of the world, which may lack perspective. However, we maintain a stance of openness to reality, rather than retreating.

Another important insight in ACT is that the world is represented in our brain using language. The mere act of thinking about something reinforces its presence and makes it a focus. Thinking can manipulate a thought or memory into a less-than-perfect reflection of reality – or even create things which are not real. Staying grounded in the here-and-now, learning to self-reflect, and being honest with ourselves about our experiences is important to help us take inventory of our interior lives (thoughts, feelings, memories, etc.) and exercise our will towards behaviors which bring us closer to our values.

By design, there are no prescribed values in ACT which people are instructed to prioritize. Recognizing the diversity of humanity, spiritual and religious traditions, and definitions of health and wellness, ACT encourages people to discern the qualities of behavior which bring a sense of meaning to their lives. While some writers in the field describe sets of values that many people tend to have, like being “cooperative,” or “honest,” or “courageous,” it is still up to everyone to choose for themselves. Because we are Catholic writers creating a Catholic program, we will invite you to look at values through a Catholic lens.

## Part II – A Christian perspective

### Some Differences between ACT and Christian theology

There are several differences between the secular view of the human being and the Christian view. Because we have characterized the secular view using terms that are consistent with a Christian view, it will be easier to see the overlap and highlight some key differences.

The largest, by far, is that Christians have chosen (albeit to differing degrees) to center their lives on God and believe in a spiritual reality. Setting aside for a bit the question of who is God (we'll come back to that), if there is a God then what are the consequences to our understanding of human nature? As we explore Catholic theology, the key additions to what we have described so far are:

- humans have a spiritual part, the soul and spirit, in addition to their physical, sensual, and intellectual parts;
- being an integrated cohesive whole to be healthy and to survive includes consideration of the spiritual part;
- our spirit is designed to be in union with God;
- therefore, within that cohesive whole, the Divine, our Creator, must reign supreme;
- our values are freely chosen via our free will, but health will always be dependent on choosing those values which are in line with God's will and bring us to union with Him;
- since God is supreme, unity with God ultimately is a gift from God, not something we can grasp.

The following sections explain the impact of these points on who we are, how we are weak, unhealthy, and wounded, and how we heal.

Note: While ACT seems to advocate values that are subjective, the emphasis is truly on value that are *freely chosen*. For Christians, in the context of our spiritual growth, our freely chosen values are those values that are aligned with God's will. In our initial and ongoing conversions, we adopt God-given values as ours.

### We are physical, sensual, intellectual, and spiritual

In addition to our physical, sensual, and intellectual parts, we also have a spiritual part. This spiritual part includes our soul and spirit (an oddly fine distinction in Catholic theology). This spiritual part is immaterial, but acts through the material. It is an immortal part of who we are, and is thus our true essence. It is the source of our ability to know, choose, love, and relate to God, who is spiritual. It is sometimes said that the spirit relates to a person's direct connection with God and the supernatural, while the soul relates to a person's interaction with the natural world.

This spiritual part, with the other parts, forms in us a composite being: in the world, the spiritual part experiences and acts in the world through the physical, sensual and intellectual parts. From the perspective of forming a cohesive whole, the spiritual part is the highest part of our being. This spiritual part is not separate from us; it is the very life of our body, making us one unified person. Thus, the needs and actions of the physical, sensual, and intellectual parts of our being must be subordinated to the needs of the spiritual part for us to be healthy. In the field of Catholic mystical theology, the specific term of art used to explain this concept is “integrity”. Integrity means that this composite of different kinds of life in human beings must act as one integral whole, and the *only* way this whole can survive is when the highest elements (intellectual and spiritual) control the lower elements (physical and sensual). In his treatise on “The Spiritual Life,” Adolphe Tanquerey said, “Whenever this subordination ceases altogether, disintegration of the elements sets in; this means decay of the system and, finally, death.”

## We were created to be one with God

How is “integrity” realized as a Christian? Let’s start with the purpose God has for creating human beings in the first place. The very first sentence in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, second edition, is (with emphasis added): “God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him *share in his own blessed life.*”

When we share in God’s blessed life, we would know and love God in the same way that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, know and love each other. We actually would share in this knowledge and love of God. But to share in God’s blessed life means that all of our other faculties must be subordinated to the knowledge and love of God. In other words, the human will must be conformed to the will of God.

## The Gift that was to be Inherited

An important question to consider now is how human beings come to a place where God’s purpose, of sharing in His blessed life, is fulfilled. The short answer is this: participation in God’s blessed life has to be a gift from God. It was a gift. It is a gift.

Turning back to the first sentence of the catechism, if God is infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, then it is not possible for us to do anything, or offer anything, through which we could earn or be entitled to something that is God’s. As beings that are less than God, it is not possible for us to take something that is not ours. But, God can and did freely choose to give us both life and the ability to share in His life.



As Scripture explains, the first human being to whom this gift was given was called Adam. See Genesis 1-3. A full exegesis of Genesis can be saved for another time. For our purposes now, let's focus on the nature of the gift given to Adam. To share in God's life, two things were and are required: the complete integrity of our being and union between our spirit and God's. In Catholic theology, these things are referred to as integrity and sanctifying grace (a gift from God that makes us holy, i.e., set apart for God), and together are called "original justice." This original justice was an inheritable gift, meaning that other human beings were intended to receive this same gift as an inheritance, i.e., through Adam, first to Eve, and then to their descendants.

One might say that Adam squandered our inheritance.

## The Lost Inheritance

The problem faced by Adam was a problem of *apparent good vs. obedience*. The fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was "good for food" (i.e., good the physical), "pleasing to the eyes" (i.e., good for the sensual), and "desirable for gaining wisdom" (i.e., good for the intellectual). But these goods were not subordinated by Adam to the good of conforming his will to God's. And "knowing what is good and what is bad," while sounding like a good, *enables one to judge* - which can only properly be done, as a matter of justice, by God alone, as He is the only being who can know all.

Since our reason and will are limited, we are inevitably going to choose an *apparent good* at some time. And when we do choose the apparent good and not obedience, and exercise our will in opposition to God's will, we lose integrity. By acting to satisfy the desires for "good" of the lower faculties, and rejecting the good of the soul, Adam surrendered the gifts of integrity and sanctifying grace, and wounded his soul. At this point, with this loss of integrity and sanctifying grace, Adam wasn't completely dead, just "mostly dead", as he was no longer able to stay in the presence of God and the physical body ultimately would die.

It is into this "state", having inherited neither sanctifying grace nor integrity, that we are born. In Christian theology, this state is called "original sin", but the term is often misunderstood. "*Original sin*" does not mean we inherit the guilt of anyone's sins. Instead, it means that we were deprived of the inheritance we would have had - it is a state of deprivation, as we no longer have the integrity and sanctifying grace originally given to Adam. It is similar to having parents who were born in Kansas but then moved to Timbuktu - well, Dorothy, you're not in Kansas anymore. A biblical example is the people of Israel, who were taken to be slaves in Egypt. Ultimately, Israelites were born into slavery in Egypt because that is where their parents were.

## We are weak and become unhealthy and wounded in even more ways

So compared to the state for which God had created us, we start off unhealthy in two ways: First, our soul and spirit are separated from God because we do not yet have sanctifying grace, so we do not share fully in the life of God. Second, we also do not yet have integrity, so we struggle not only to subordinate our senses, emotions, feelings, thoughts, memories, and imaginations to our own reason and will, but also to subordinate our own reason and will, which seeks freedom and independence, to our soul's desire to be conformed to God's will.

This struggle results in additional injury to our wills and souls. The will, in response to struggling and giving in to the senses, is wearied, weakened, tormented, and blinded. The soul is similarly injured. But Catholic theology provides an important distinction.

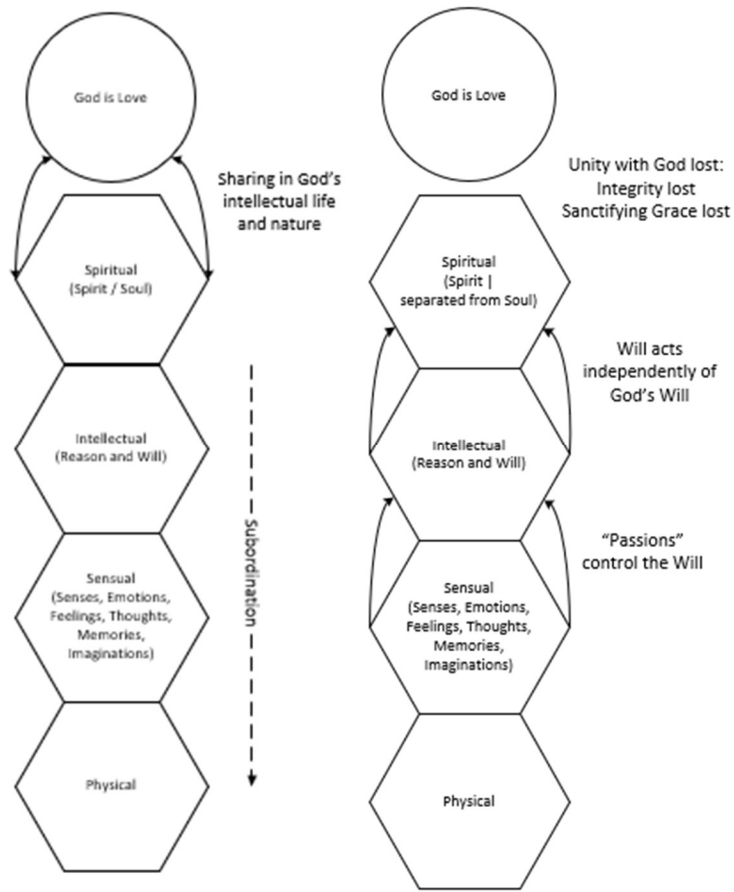
As St. John of the Cross explains in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, nothing external injures the *soul*. Also, see Mark 7:15 (“Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile.”). Everything that acts upon us, whether from natural causes, or from others hurting us (intentionally, negligently, accidentally), or other things, only affects the body and mind. Our senses, emotions, and feelings may be triggered. We may have bad memories. We may have difficult thoughts. We may have provocative imaginations. We even may be physically injured and suffering greatly. We may be psychologically traumatized. These injuries may affect our ability to reason or to exercise our will. None of these injures the *soul*. What injures the soul is how we choose to act. Just like the will, the soul also becomes wearied, weakened, tormented, and blind, when the will fails to act in accordance with God's will. In addition, the soul becomes defiled or impure, so that it becomes less like the sanctified state it could have if filled with sanctifying grace.

All this weakness, unhealthiness, and woundedness happens because we did not inherit sanctifying grace and integrity. But before we blame Adam for our predicaments, recall this phrase from the Easter Vigil Mass of the Roman Catholic Church: “O happy fault that earned for us so great, so glorious a Redeemer!”

But before we get to that, let's quickly summarize what was explained so far.

## A Visual Summary of Original Justice and Sin

Sometimes it helps to visualize how something is structured and how it works as an aid to deeper understanding. The following illustrates our “healed” state vs. our injured state without Jesus, in view of what we described above:



Original Justice | Healing      Original Sin | Wounds from Sin

In the state of original justice, our spirit shares in God’s intellectual life and nature, which is love itself. That spirit in turn conforms the reason and will to God’s will, to which the sensual and physical are further subordinated. When sin (original or otherwise) breaks that unity with God and integrity and sanctifying grace are lost, the “passions” (our physical and sensual parts) tend to control the will, and the reason and will act independently of God’s will.

Spiritual healing is therefore the process of restoring the soul to that state of unity with God with sanctifying grace and integrity (conforming the will to the will of God, and subordinating the sensual and physical to the will). When we are healed we become Christ-like, we become love.

## We can still be healed

Catholic theology recognizes that there are different ways through which we receive healing.

### Natural means of healing

One category of healing is called the natural means of healing. The natural means include both healthy habits and the combination of medicinal, surgical, psychological, and other therapeutical approaches to healing. These therapies affect the material part of the human being – the physical body, the senses, emotions, feelings, thoughts, memories, imaginations, and our ability to exercise our wills and ability to reason. Healthy habits, such as sleep, diet, exercise, and avoiding harmful substances, also affect the body and mind. These therapies and healthy habits are further useful in our spiritual life to the extent they can affect our ability to exercise our will and reason in alignment with God’s will. In these cases, they can affect our soul.

Psychology tells us that we are most likely to change when we freely desire and choose to change. Using techniques at the foundation of ACT, it is important for us to focus on change by defining our values and by exercising our will in committed action towards our values, while mastering, with God’s help, our senses, emotions, feelings, thoughts, memories, and imaginations. ACT also helps us to heal by learning to accept suffering as a reality of the human experience.

### Restoring sanctifying grace

Our Catholic theology complements ACT by addressing the needs of the soul, by giving structure and direction to define our values, and by recognizing that God offers the primary means of healing the soul. Importantly, God’s grace always leads the way in any healing. Our role is to respond. As St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa teach, all progress in the spiritual life is a work of God in the soul – we cooperate, but He is the divine physician. Every ability to choose the good is itself a grace.

Restoring our original state, with sanctifying grace and integrity, and further healing our souls, by purifying them, letting them see, setting them free from torment, and giving them strength and vitality, requires a special gift from God and our acceptance of and cooperation with that gift.

That gift comes through Jesus. Who is Jesus? Using the words of the Nicene Creed, dating to the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, God is a trinity, of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, of which Jesus is the Son:

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father

before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. ... I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

The creed summarizes what Jesus did and what happened to him by saying:

For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

Attempting to put this in some plain English, God, as part of his plan for mankind, decided to become a man himself, Jesus. Because this man, Jesus, is both God and man, he has both sanctifying grace and integrity and never loses them. Through his incarnation, life, suffering and death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven, we now have Jesus from whom we can inherit the same graces that Adam lost. [We will save for some other time the explanation of how this actually works and the concept of “atonement”.] This inheritance is a kind of healing, as it says in Scripture (Isaiah 53:4-5), “Yet it was our pain that he bore, our sufferings he endured. We thought of him as stricken, struck down by God and afflicted. But he was pierced for our sins, crushed for our iniquity. He bore the punishment that makes us whole, by his wounds we were healed.”

How do we claim our inheritance? Jesus told Nicodemus (John 3:5), “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” We understand this as the Sacrament of Baptism in the Catholic Church. When a Christian is baptized, we are baptized into the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, so that through baptism we receive God’s gift of sanctifying grace, which reunifies our spirit with God – We become the adopted children of God! Therefore, we can now receive our inheritance. Also, as taught by the Catholic Church, if we subsequently act in such a serious way that we reject that sanctifying grace, we can still return to Jesus and be again restored to grace through the Sacrament of Reconciliation (confession). So through the gift of Jesus, through baptism and reconciliation, our souls are restored to a state of sanctifying grace.

## Restoring Integrity

Our integrity is restored when our will is fully conformed to God's will and our sensual and physical parts are fully subordinated to our will. Integrity is generally not restored by the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Reconciliation, but instead is restored through a gradual process. This process is the primary work of the spiritual life. Because restoring integrity involves unifying the soul with God's internal life, such restoration requires grace from God and cooperation with that grace. Specifically, to help us grow in integrity, God's grace includes a. gifts of the Holy Spirit from Baptism or Confirmation, b. the further gift of Jesus himself through the Eucharist, and c. intercessory prayer. Through our prayer and effort, we can cooperate with that grace.

Part of our effort includes using all the natural means of healing, especially using techniques like those from ACT. These techniques help us define our values to be in alignment with the will of God and to take committed action (i.e., exercise our wills) towards those values.

Because we are using ACT, our efforts start with choosing our values. For Christians, the greatest commandment is to love God with all your mind, heart, soul, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. Love is *the* primary value that guides all others. The rest of this workbook is a methodical process of considering values that have been identified by the Christian mystics and in Catholic theology as important to the spiritual life. These values are essentially different ways of being love in different contexts. We call this methodical process a spiritual audit. This audit invites you to explore and freely choose these values as your own as part of your own ongoing conversion.

What we will explain next is how, given such values, we can use techniques of ACT to learn how to exercise our wills towards those values. When this work is done in reliance on and in cooperation with God's grace, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the sacraments, and intercessory prayer, we can make progress growing in integrity.

## Part III – Exercising the Will towards Christian Values

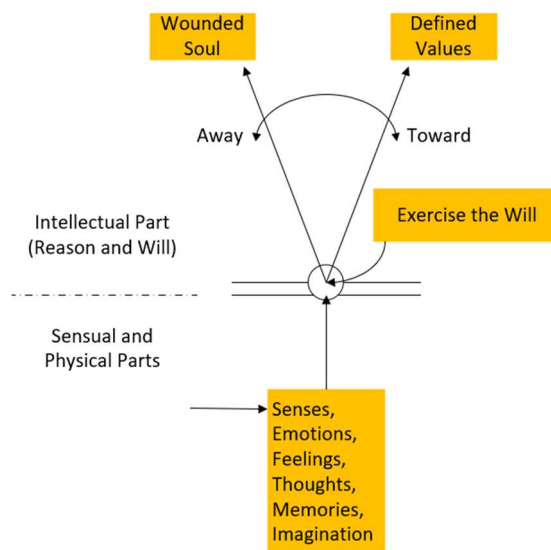
We use this Christian understanding of our human nature and our need to restore our integrity to develop a framework for growth in the spiritual life. This framework involves relying on grace and cooperating with grace in three key ways: One, we learn how to exercise the will *in the moment*. Two, we go through an inevitable *cycle* of growth and retreat. Three, we go through *stages* of the spiritual life as we develop the ability to exercise our will more and more in union with God’s.

### Exercising the Will in the Present Moment

A critical element in the exercise of our will is how our physical and sensual parts interact with our reason and will through our nervous system, especially our brains. Psychology and biology tell us that the brain has two key sections. One section handles our reason and will. Another section handles our senses, emotions, feelings, memories, thoughts, and imaginations.

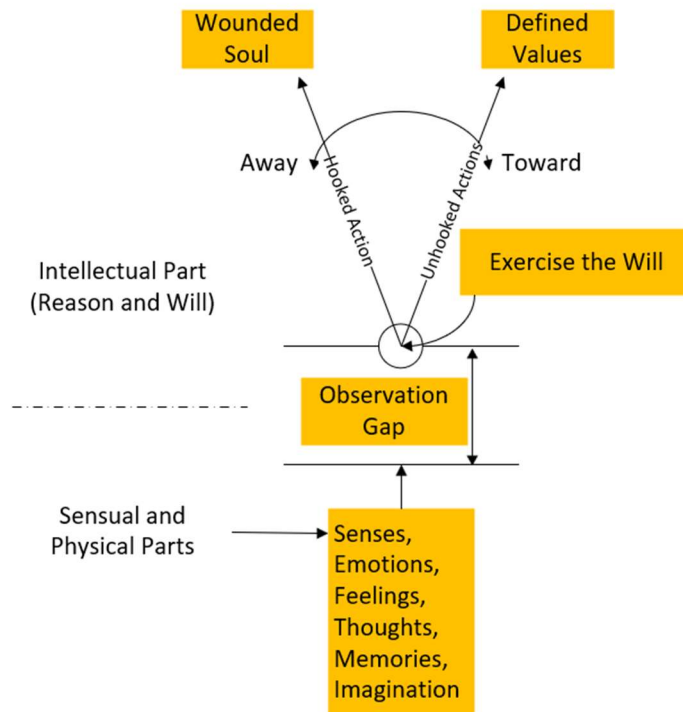
In any given moment, an action generally is a response to something external to our will – something from our senses, emotions, feelings, thoughts, memories, or imagination. Using our reason and will, we decide what is important to us (our values) and choose in the moment what action to take. In ACT, we call each such moment a “choice point.”

We can visualize a choice point like the drawing below. In response to our senses, emotions, feelings, thoughts, memories, or imagination regarding the present moment, we exercise our will by taking an action that may lead toward our defined values, or away from our defined values (which wounds the soul):



For the sake of this explanation, our senses, emotions, feelings, thoughts, memories, and imagination are called the “passions” for short. When our passions drive our actions away from our values, we call those actions “hooked”; when our will drives our actions towards our values, we call those actions “unhooked”. To be complete, some actions away from our values can be exercised by the will. Also, some actions towards our values can be driven by our passions.

On the psychological level, our ability to exercise our will towards our values, through unhooked actions, depends on our ability to act independently of our passions. We call this ability the “observation gap.” The larger this observation gap is, the stronger our ability is to act independently of our passions and have unhooked actions. The smaller this observation gap, the weaker our ability to act independently of our passions, and we have hooked actions. Here we update our drawing above to highlight the observation gap and its effects.



In the spiritual domain, saints like St. Teresa of Avila encourage a practice called *recollection* – a calm, prayerful awareness of one’s interior movements in God’s presence. By recollection, we step back for a moment, notice our thoughts or emotions, and invite God’s to guide us before we respond. Thus recollection is the spiritual parallel to the concept of the “observation gap.”

The strength of our “observation gap” depends on a set of skills that enable us to separately notice what our passions are communicating to our intellect. First, there is the ability of self-observation. This ability may be impacted by our ability to just listen to all of our mental



chatter and by our ability to accept discomfort or reject pleasure. That discomfort or pleasure could arise out of our passions themselves, or from listening to our mental chatter, or from the circumstances in which we exercise our will. The techniques used in ACT are directed at managing and maximizing this observation gap.

Because skills are required to exercise our will, it is unfair to tell anyone to just “try harder” when challenged to act toward Christian values (or toward any value for that matter). Sometimes a person may simply lack skills. In tough cases, some people are not capable of developing the skills. Sometimes change requires healing before those skills can be developed or used. We may need healing in our thoughts (in the lies we tell ourselves about ourselves, other people or our realities), in our memories (our traumas from life), in our senses and in what we desire or avoid, in our emotions and feelings (in how we react to situations), and in our imagination (by coming back to the present moment). We may need to develop skills for choosing to act towards values, for observing ourselves, or for persevering despite discomfort. In some cases, the need for healing can involve psychological or medical issues that need professional treatment.

Importantly, we are not alone in these efforts. Through the grace of God, we can receive sanctifying grace and gifts of the Holy Spirit through the sacraments, and we are strengthened in that grace by surrendering to God, in prayer, and through our hard work. Some gifts of the Holy Spirit act directly on the will to strengthen it (these are explained more fully in the spiritual audit). Also, we can ask others to pray for us. In this context we also can use all the natural means of healing. Thus, these skills of observing and not impulsively obeying our passions grow over time with practice and grace.

## The Cycle

As we deal with our daily moments, we will inevitably fail to make choices that are directed towards our Christian values. Even in the best circumstances, we too will inevitably choose the apparent good over obedience. Some failures, if done with full knowledge and consent in a grave matter may cut us off from sanctifying grace. More commonly, many daily failures may wound our souls and make them less responsive to grace. The more wounded our souls are, we become less capable of cooperating with God’s grace.

The great spiritual teachers of the Catholic church have all emphasized the need for frequent confession and reception of the Eucharist. Both heal our wounded souls. When we receive these sacraments, God restores grace to our souls and we become more capable of cooperating with God’s grace.

In all our lives, we go through cycles where our souls are wounded, then are restored through reception of the sacraments, and then we grow. But we become wounded again, yet are

restored again. By relying on and cooperating with God's grace to align our values with God's will, make committed actions, and exercise our will towards God's will, we begin to reduce the self-wounding, and advance in our integrity in stages.

## The Seven Stages of the Spiritual Life

Throughout the last 2000 years the Catholic Church has had many great teachers about the spiritual life. All of them generally describe about seven stages in the spiritual life.

The first stage is an awakening. This stage involves becoming aware of God's presence and developing a curiosity or desire to encounter God more.

The second stage is conversion which involves, as explained later, a response to this encounter with God, which is a decision to have a relationship with God.

The third stage is purgation which involves actively removing things from our lives which are contrary to this relationship with God.

The fourth stage is consolation, where we experience a sense of peace arising out of the closeness to God that results from purgation.

The fifth stage is what many spiritual masters describe as a Dark Night, which typically affects the senses, then the spirit. The Dark Night is a period where God permits the soul to feel abandoned and dry. According to St. John of the Cross, God uses this period to purify the soul and prepare it for deeper union with him. Enduring the dark night is difficult without the preparation of the other stages, and God would not lead one through it without preparation.

Exiting the dark night brings us to the sixth stage, which is a state of consolation that is compared to the joy of being engaged for marriage (St. Teresa of Avila calls it a "spiritual betrothal"). It is sometimes called the "illuminative" stage.

The seventh and final stage is full union with God (St. Teresa of Avila calls it a "spiritual marriage"). It is sometimes called the "unitive" stage.

These stages are not accomplishments or achievements, but rather just a description of the state of one's relationship with God. In fact, the transition from one stage to another is preceded by grace, not because we are entitled to it or have earned it.

We now turn to the spiritual audit to lead us through defining our values, exercising our will, while going through the cycles of daily life, as we hope to progress in these stages of the spiritual life, with the help of God's grace.

## Part IV –Introduction to the Spiritual Audit

### What is it?

What is a spiritual audit? On the one hand, it is similar to what Catholics call an Examination of Conscience – this audit provides a methodical and comprehensive set of themes to help us reflect on how well we are conforming our will to God’s. On the other hand, it is different from a typical Examination of Conscience because the primary purpose of an Examination of Conscience is to identify sins that we want to bring to confession. An Examination focuses on what we did or failed to do, and whether that was a sin. In contrast, the primary purpose of this audit is to identify positive values to live by, a person’s readiness to work on taking specific committed actions towards those values, and any need for healing or related skills. Implicitly, choosing to live by the value rejects and roots out its opposite. Identifying related sins is a consequence of the audit. But, by focusing on the positive, and not focusing on the negative, we are not psychologically reinforcing the negative.

At the foundation of the audit is *the* primary value: to do God's will in each and every moment, by loving God and loving neighbor, by being Christ-like in each moment, by being love in each moment. The audit helps us explore how to be love while not being a slave to our senses, emotions, feelings, or thoughts, not avoiding our own pain, not seeking our own pleasure, and not living in the past or future but in the present moment.

The set of values in this audit includes what Catholic theology refers to as virtues, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, charisms, and other qualities of behavior that describe how to be love in response to a variety of situations we may encounter. All the values are defined *positively*, as something we would aspire to, not as something to avoid. The values are grouped and ordered to promote building a good spiritual foundation, and are aligned with the seven stages of the spiritual life and the seven gifts of the holy spirit.

The values addressed in the awakening and conversion stages (Part I of the Audit: Humility) are primarily related to our relationship with God, growing in humility, and growing in faith. In this stage, we lean into Holy Spirit’s gifts of Piety and Fear of the Lord.

The values addressed in the purgation and consolation stages (Part II of the Audit: Detachment) are primarily related to the relationship with ourselves, growing in self-control and detachment from things of this world. Because we detach from things of this world out of love for God, growing in humility and other values in our relationship with God first provides a stronger foundation for us to grow in self-control and detachment. The Holy Spirit’s gifts of Fortitude and Counsel are the greatest aid in this stage.

The values addressed next (Part III of the Audit) are primarily related to our relationships with others, i.e., how to we love others out of love for God. These values tend to be associated more with the illuminative and unitive stages of the spiritual life. By building our relationship with God and self through humility and detachment first, we have a better foundation to work on being love to others. The gifts of Knowledge, Understanding, and Wisdom help us grow in our abilities to exhibit the value of being love to our neighbor.

For each value, we explain and provide a positively-defined quality of behavior to strive for that encompasses the value. We then offer a few scripture passages for your reflection. We complete the presentation of the value with our reflection on what that value looks like when exercised, how we start to grow in developing our will towards that value, and finally what that value looks like when we are fully in union with God.

We incorporate psychology into the audit in two ways.

To be cognizant of each individual's abilities and situations, for each value there is an initial assessment which is intended to reveal whether someone is psychologically ready to work on a value. This assessment may reveal reasons why someone is not ready to work towards a value without assistance, such as therapy. You will be invited to respond to a series of questions, where each response is on a scale of 1 to 5. The collection of scores for all the values at any given time helps identify values we are most willing and able to work on now. By tracking these scores over time, we can measure (in a self-assessed way) our "progress" in adopting and exercising our will towards these values. Part of this assessment also generally addresses the question of actions taken by us that are away from the value, and whether, as a Catholic, that action is something to bring to confession.

For each value, we also offer techniques from ACT to help us exercise the will towards the value. These exercises may include ways to notice what our sensual and physical parts are telling us, to develop perspective about the stories we have about ourselves, to stay focused on the present moment. These exercises also encourage us to be accepting of our circumstances and compassionate with ourselves – which in Christian terms means trusting in God's providence and mercy. Instead of using harsh self-judgment, we engage in these exercises in prayer, recalling the God is tender and patient with us and asking God to let us see ourselves in the same way. For each value you choose to work on, we suggest identifying and committing to taking a specific action toward that value, praying for God's grace to help us follow through with our commitment.

By regularly working with this spiritual audit, in the context of the sacraments and prayer, with the intent of cooperating with the graces given, we expect you will experience spiritual healing and growth that will lead to a deeper union with God.

We begin the audit by assuming that a person is in the very first stage of the spiritual life: awakening. At this stage, we don't ask "Do you believe in God?" – as this presumes some concept of God in the first place. So, instead, we pose this question: "Who is God?" Many times, healing begins by exploring our answer to that question. The foundation of our spiritual life begins here: we get to know who God is and who *we are* in relation to God. Everything else comes after that.

## Who is God?

It simply is not possible to fully answer this question. Instead, we offer five thoughts about God for you to consider as you start this journey in your spiritual life.

### 1. God is beyond understanding, but we grow in understanding God through a relationship with God.

St. Augustine said:

“So what are we to say... about God? For if you have fully grasped what you want to say, it isn't God. If you have been able to comprehend it, you have comprehended something else instead of God. If you think you have been able to comprehend, your thoughts have deceived you. So he isn't this, if this is what you have understood; but if he is this, then you haven't understood it. So what is it you want to say, seeing you haven't been able to understand it?”  
St. Augustine, sermon 52.

Another Catholic theologian, Ludwig Ott, expressed a similar idea this way: “Our knowledge of God in this world is a composition of many inadequate concepts, and on account of this composition it is necessarily limited and imperfect”.

In other words, any scientific or rational process we use to understand or explain God, and the language we use to express that understanding, cannot fully explain God. Whatever we can say is incomplete, imperfect, inadequate, and in part inaccurate.

So then, what are we to say about God?

Let's use an analogy and ask the question, “Who are you?” How do I answer that question? In two ways. I can find ways to know *about* you from others. Or I can spend time with you, and get to know you. All of the Christian theologians and mystics essentially say the same thing about God - we can know about God from others, and we can get to know God by spending time with God.

We can learn about God from our families, friends, and others, and from spiritual writings. We can get to know God by spending time in prayer, in reading scripture, through serving other people, and in his creation.

So if we do that, what is something that we should be able to learn about God?

### 2. God is a being who is love

When God called Moses to go to Egypt and lead the Israelites out of slavery, Moses wanted proof for his fellow Israelites, and asked God, “When I go to the Israelites and say to them

‘the God of your fathers has sent me to you’, if they ask me, ‘What is his name?’, what am I to tell them?”. God responded (Exodus 3:13-14) **“I am who am”**. Then he added: **‘This is what you will tell the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.’**”

God is not just another being – God is Being itself (the “I AM WHO AM”). He is eternally present – beyond both space and time. Scripture also reveals that **God is love** (1 John 4:8). Love isn’t just what God does, Love is who God *is*. God’s very being is love. God is a relational being who therefore creates out of love to share that being with others, and then wills good for everything created.

### 3. God wants us to be love too.

So if God is love, relational, eternal, and infinite, then what kind of relationship can we have with God? The Catholic Church puts it this way, in the very first sentence of its “catechism.”

“God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness created man to share in his own blessed life.”

This God who is beyond understanding, who has a blessed life of infinite perfect love, wants to you to share in that blessed life. And just how much does God want to have this relationship *with you*? The story of Adam and Eve reveals this desire God has for each one of us.

### 4. God acts first by seeking us out

When Adam and Eve first took the fruit of the tree, the only thing they were told not to do, they hid from God. (Genesis 3:1-8) They were ashamed they were naked. They were ashamed of disobedience. So they hid.

What is the very first thing that God says to Adam and Eve?

**“Where are you?”** (Genesis 3:9)

God knows everything – and so he already knew what Adam and Eve had done and where they were. He wasn’t asking because he didn’t know. He knew all too well. I think he was asking because *they* didn’t know.

So here is one thing you can know about who God is: whoever you are and whatever you have done, God wants to have a relationship with you, and calls out, “Where are you?” Do you know? This call from God is what Catholic theology calls grace – God’s undeserved help that awakens our hearts.

## 5. God wants us to let Him transform us.

One day, while I was greeting tourists at our church, I started talking to a man. He said he was raised Catholic, but had stopped going to church. He, with his brother and sister, lit a candle for their mother. His sister quipped, “Mom would be happy to see us back at a church.” I felt comfortable asking the man, “Why not go back to church?” His answer stunned and troubled me. He said, “You know, I’ve done a lot of bad things in my life. I’m just not a good person.”

Like the man I met, we might think that we must first become “a good person,” through our own self-improvement, and then God judges our success or failure. We might believe that God loves us only after we clean up our act, and punishes us or withdraws his love if we don’t.

Such a belief would contradict everything we just said: God loves you. God loves you regardless of what you have done or whatever you think of yourself. God doesn't love us only after we make ourselves holy and perfect. Instead, because God loves us, God seeks after us. He wants us to see and know where we are and where we could be. He wants to make us holy and perfect.

So what example should we follow? Let’s look at the story of the blind man, Bartimaeus (Luke 18:35-43):

As Jesus approached Jericho a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging, and hearing a crowd going by, he inquired what was happening. They told him, “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.” He shouted, “Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!” The people walking in front rebuked him, telling him to be silent, but he kept calling out all the more, “Son of David, have pity on me!” Then Jesus stopped and ordered that he be brought to him; and when he came near, **Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?”** He replied, “Lord, please let me see.” Jesus told him, “Have sight; your faith has saved you.” He immediately received his sight and followed him, giving glory to God. When they saw this, all the people gave praise to God.

Growth in the spiritual life is not about transforming ourselves. Instead, like the blind man, we ask God to transform us and trust that God will. If we can learn to see ourselves as someone that God knows and loves deeply, we can start by asking God to let us see and know ourselves as God sees and knows us. We can ask God to help us identify those things for which we need healing. These principles are reflected in the spiritual audit. This is not a



self-help program. Every step we take is a cooperation with God's grace, and we start by asking God to let us see and know ourselves as God already sees and knows us. God Himself accomplishes in us the purification we ask for, as we trust and surrender to Him.

So this reflection on Who is God leads to the question - do you want to have this kind of relationship with God? Do you want to get to know God and share in God's blessed life of being infinite, eternal, and perfect love? Do you want to respond to God seeking *you* out like Adam and Bartimaeus? What do you want God to do for you? Do you want to let God transform *you*? Do you want to *ask* God for that?

If yes, then, according to all the Christian spiritual teachers, the primary way to do that, to ask God to share in his life, is through prayer. And so *Prayer* is the first value we propose for our spiritual journey, as we turn now to our spiritual audit.

# Prayer – The First Value

## ***Definition***

Prayer is how we interact with God. Prayer is commonly thought of as words, whether spontaneous or memorized, whether said out loud, sung, or thought silently, whether alone or as a group. Prayer includes words that glorify or acknowledge or praise God, or offer God worship for who God is. Prayer can be words that express gratitude to God. Prayer can be words that ask God for forgiveness, or grace, or other help, whether for yourself or for others. But we do not need to express anything to engage in prayer. Prayer can be just listening, just contemplating, or just being present. Regardless, prayer involves taking time to spend with God. Because we are using ACT as our model of behavioral change, we define prayer as a positive and directional quality of our behavior: the quality of taking time to interact with God, in word, song, or silence, to praise, thank, worship, adore, petition, contemplate, listen to, or just be with God.

## ***Scripture***

Psalms 46:10: "Be still, and know that I am God."

Psalms 37:7: Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for Him.

Jeremiah 33:3: Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.

James 4:8: "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."

John 10:27: "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me"

Isaiah 30:21: "Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it," when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left"

Matthew 6:5-13: When teaching his disciples to pray what we call the Lord's Prayer, Jesus said, "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

Romans 8:26-27: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

## ***Reflection***

To help understand what it means to pray, let us first consider what prayer is not.

Prayer is not asking for unearned favors for power, wealth, pleasure, or honor, or to be rescued from the consequences of our own actions. When Jesus was tempted in the desert (see Matthew 4), he was tempted to turn stone into bread, or to be saved after throwing himself from a tower, or to have power over the world. These are all examples of temptations toward satisfying worldly desires, not prayers of need.

Prayer also is not an act of superstition. Superstition arises when I expect God to deliver something in response to asking for that thing. But isn't that what we do in prayer – ask for something? Well, yes, but, it is our disposition, or attitude, or intent towards God that distinguishes one from another. Are we approaching God with trust, humility, and surrender to God's will, or are we trying to control or manipulate God through our "prayer"? Superstition tends to look like doing or saying "the right things" to get some reward, especially where the reward is the satisfaction of a desire for power, wealth, pleasure, or honor.

Memorized, standard prayers (rote prayers) may be frowned upon in some Christian circles, but are frequently used by Catholics. Rote prayers can be helpful because, for example, they can be called upon in moments of difficulty. They also enable group prayer, and prayer in a manner that is known to be theologically correct. They can be easily taught to children. However, if we rely solely on rote prayers, we risk just checking a box (like, did I pray the rosary today), or not actually spending time with God (like, while our mouth is rattling off words, we make a grocery list). We also risk not developing our prayer life.

One thing that can help make a rote prayer more authentic is by taking time to think differently about the prayer and the meaning of the prayer, so that this meaning is on our minds while we pray.

For example, consider the "Our Father". In English, our grammar does not express the depth of meaning that comes through in some other languages, such as French. The Our Father in French, for example, expresses more accurately this idea in English: Let Your Name be Holy, Your Kingdom come, and Your Will be done - let these 3 things happen! – here on Earth as they are already happening in Heaven. Also, try saying the following as one phrase, without the typical break and breath in the middle, and see how the way we say this prayer changes its meaning: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

As another example, consider the beginning of "Hail Mary". One phrase (Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you) is what the angel said to Mary at the Annunciation (Luke 1:28). The next (blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb), is what Elizabeth said to Mary (after John the Baptist left in her womb responding to Jesus' presence

– Luke 1:42). After saying these phrases, consider, what do the words told to Mary tell us *about God*?

Some prayer is not even expressed in words – we are just present to God. Reportedly, when asked about her prayer, Mother Teresa said that she just listens. When asked what Jesus did, she would say that He just listens too. But what does it mean to listen in prayer? Scriptures describe hearing God’s voice by being still before God and by drawing closer to God. "Be still, and know that I am God." — Psalm 46:10. As we grow in our spiritual life and conform our will more towards God’s, it becomes easier to hear God’s voice. We come to recognize how God speaks to us. His voice becomes personal. Jesus said, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” (John 10:27).

One prayer practice is to be still, especially in solitude and in silence. Sometimes a place in nature can be helpful. Stillness, solitude, and silence reduce our distractions, and enable us to notice the presence of God, whether in large things or small.

Scripture also tells us that God knows what we need. So, if God already knows, why pray? My guess is God wants us to acknowledge what we need and ask God for it. God will not force his will upon us, and wants us to ask. God already knows our imperfections and the healing we need, but waits for us to acknowledge them and ask for healing.

So, how do we grow in our ability to pray?

When asked how one can improve their prayer life, Thomas Merton is said to have answered, “Take the time.” For everything in life, the best way to improve how we do something is by taking the time and actually doing it. Expressing this in an ACT-inspired framework, if you choose to have prayer as a value for your life, then make some committed action towards taking time to pray.

After choosing to take the time, we can then notice things about prayer. We will notice whether we can make the time we chose to set aside. There may be things that help us pray or distract us. We may experience a variety of emotions or thoughts or physical sensations when we pray. We may explore rote prayers, prayers in our heads, vocal prayer. We may prepare our own prayers, and try spontaneous prayer. We may notice the presence of God or an interaction with God.

What does prayer look like when we are in full union with God? Ultimately, sharing in God’s blessed life is eternal prayer. And we will plant this one seed: eternal prayer is not about us, but about worshiping God and interceding for others, so that they may enjoy the mercy and grace of God, and join us in heaven. The eternal prayer is about being love.

# Prayer - Questions

These questions are designed to help you reflect on your current experience with **Prayer**. When used across all the themes in this audit, your answers will help guide you in identifying themes you are most ready to work on, based on their importance and relevance to you and on your current desire and ability to work on them. Your answers are private, for you alone. There is no judgment based on your answers. Because your answers will help guide your future work, we encourage you to answer honestly based on your true experience, without concern for how others might respond or how your answers might seem to others. Everyone's responses reflect their own unique experiences, which are important to guide your personal growth moving forward. Therefore, all answers are valid.

Theme definition: **“Prayer” is the quality of taking time to interact with God, in word, song, or silence, to praise, thank, worship, adore, petition, contemplate, listen to, or just be with God.**

Relevant situations and opposites: Indifference, superstition

After answering question 1, for each statement, select the response that best reflects your current experience. Unless noted otherwise, '1' means 'strongly agree' and '5' means 'strongly disagree'.

We recommend entering into prayer to do these self-reflections. We invite you to do whatever is necessary for you to be comfortable and free from distractions. We offer the following prayer, but feel free to use your own words:

Come, Holy Spirit, help me see myself as You see me, and love myself as You love me. Help me to see You as a God who desires to make me holy, perfect, and merciful, so I may share in your blessed life. Help me to exercise my will towards this value of Prayer.

1. How frequently do you encounter situations in which Prayer is relevant to you?

1 = daily | 2 = weekly | 3 = monthly | 4 = yearly | 5 = not much

2. I desire to embody the behaviors described by this definition of Prayer.

1 = strongly agree | 2 = agree | 3 = neutral | 4 = disagree | 5 = strongly disagree

3. I am currently willing to invest time and effort into working on Prayer.

1 = strongly agree | 2 = agree | 3 = neutral | 4 = disagree | 5 = strongly disagree

4. I have a sense that God is calling me to work on my Prayer.

1 = strongly agree | 2 = agree | 3 = neutral | 4 = disagree | 5 = strongly disagree

5. I believe I am doing a good job embodying behaviors described by this definition of Prayer.

1 = strongly agree | 2 = agree | 3 = neutral | 4 = disagree | 5 = strongly disagree

6. I have personal examples of times when I acted in ways that reflect this definition of Prayer.

1 = strongly agree | 2 = agree | 3 = neutral | 4 = disagree | 5 = strongly disagree

7. I can think of other people who have successfully acted in ways that reflect this value of Prayer.

1 = strongly agree | 2 = agree | 3 = neutral | 4 = disagree | 5 = strongly disagree

8. I have someone whom I can turn to for encouragement if I choose to work on my Prayer.

1 = strongly agree | 2 = agree | 3 = neutral | 4 = disagree | 5 = strongly disagree

9. Thinking about Prayer brings up emotional discomfort or difficult memories.

*Note: for this question, 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree*

1 = strongly disagree | 2 = disagree | 3 = neutral | 4 = agree | 5 = strongly agree

10. I feel confident in my ability to remain emotionally balanced when I think about Prayer.

1 = strongly agree | 2 = agree | 3 = neutral | 4 = disagree | 5 = strongly disagree

11. I feel confident in my ability to work on Prayer and make meaningful changes.

1 = strongly agree | 2 = agree | 3 = neutral | 4 = disagree | 5 = strongly disagree

12. I feel ready to consider professional help with respect to my prayer life. If any response to questions #6 through #11 is a '4' or '5', select 2, 3, 4, or 5. Otherwise, select '1'.

1 = not applicable | 2 = strongly agree | 3 = agree | 4 = disagree | 5 = strongly disagree

13. (if applicable) As a Catholic, or soon-to-be Catholic, I am ready to consider my Prayer to prepare for confession.

1 = strongly agree | 2 = agree | 3 = neutral | 4 = disagree | 5 = strongly disagree

14. (if applicable) As a Christian, I would like to have others pray for me with respect to my ability to pray.

1 = strongly agree | 2 = agree | 3 = neutral | 4 = disagree | 5 = strongly disagree

15. If you are ready to consider bringing your prayer life to confession (you answered 1 or 2 to question 13), consider: Are there times when you chose to avoid prayer? Are there times you used prayer to request satisfaction of your desires? Are there times when your prayer was a form of superstition?

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