

“There is life in the seed, there is power in the soil; but unless infinite power is exercised day and night, the seed will yield no return...Every seed grows, every plant develops, by the power of God...The germination of the seed represents the beginning of spiritual life, and the development of the plant is a figure of the development of character. There can be no life without growth.” (E.G.White Education pg 104, 105)

One needs a lot of wisdom to make right decisions, to test ones ideas, change ones habits and build ones character. One also needs wisdom to progress and reach fulfillment in one’s life. For the believer this wisdom is a gift from God which is received after much prayer.



To become the one that we are meant to be, to let ourselves be refashioned by God, this is the step by step journey that we are invited on in Growing your life.

Enjoy the journey.

“Until we...become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (NIV Eph 4:13)

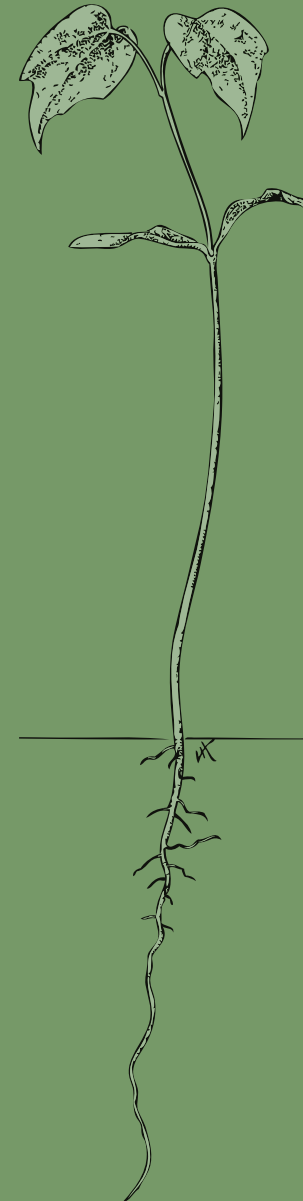
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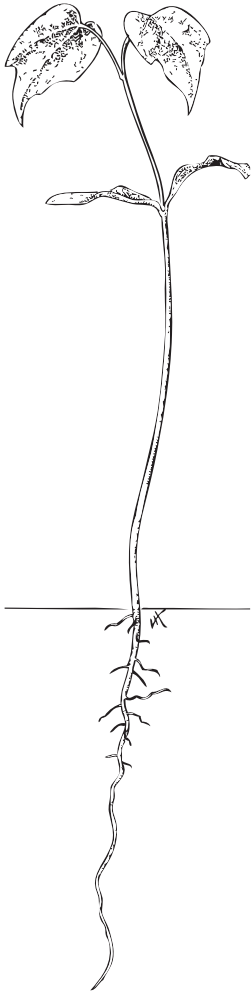
reflections
on personal
stewardship
from the lives
of Joseph and
Jesus



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General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

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Introduction

This devotional is the English translation of the original work *Itinéraires de croissance* in French by the Stewardship Coordinating Committee of the Franco-Belgian Union of Seventh-day Adventists. The committee's goal in putting together this resource was to capture those areas and aspects of the Christian life that were left out in the traditional approach to stewardship which focused on the four T's: Time, Talents, Treasure and Temple. ***Growing Your Life*** goes way beyond these four T's, and it opens up a lot more in the area of "being" within human development.

With any translation, there is always the challenge of trying to find the most appropriate expressions and concepts in the receiving language that would maintain correctly the original thoughts and ideas of the author(s), and this English version of the original is no exception. For example, the closest we have come in translating *développement de "l'être"* into English is "self-management" yet its meaning extends to include the "inner being," and the "inner" working of our brain. The problem is that, sometimes, as humans we are unconscious of what is going on within our minds. But the mind is where most battles are fought. The Bible talks about the "heart" as being the place where all decisions are made, and we know today that it is in the grey cells of our "brain" that the processes of decision-making take place.

The French manual was a challenge to the translators because of the density of the text and the highly meaningful implication of each word used. It contains 52 chapters and was written to be used as a weekly devotional. The topics covered are so rich and profound that we felt there was enough food for thought for each week of the year.

Growing Your Life is one of many tools that the Stewardship Ministries Department of the General Conference is producing to help church members grow in their Christian life and experience. It is not our intention to make this material another item on a to-do list by which church members could reach perfection by

means of personal effort. Only an intimate experience, and walk with God can produce that. But readers of this resource can get the most benefit out of these devotions if they contemplate on them after reading the book *Get Normal*, which explores the Biblical foundations of stewardship.

We believe that stewardship is the total response of the Christian to the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and it is not limited to money only; even tithe and offerings. That stewardship is about full commitment, and the surrendering of the human will to the lordship of Jesus daily. Our prayer is that Joseph's personal experience, struggles, and triumph will help us each one to grow in the likeness of Him who loved us.

Stewardship Ministries Department
General Conference

Foreword

By Dr Roberto Badenas

Director of Education, Euro-Africa Division

The writer Garcia Marquez says that one day a scientist who was working on a project to solve the big problems of the world, was interrupted in his thoughts by his seven-year-old son's interruption in his office. Unable to convince his little boy to go and play some place else, the scientist took a page of a magazine on which there was a huge world map, cut it into small pieces, then handed the pieces to the child, with sticky tape, saying to him; "Since you like puzzles, I challenge you to reconstruct the world map."

The child retired in a corner to do his puzzle and the father went back to his files, believing he would have peace for the rest of the day.

However, after just a few minutes, the child called out, "Dad, it is done."

To the father's surprise, the world map was perfectly reconstituted!

"How did you do it?" asked the father. "Since you don't even know the geography of the world?"

"Well", answered the child, "I don't know the geography of the world but I saw that there was a picture of a man on the other side of the page. So, I started with reconstituting the man. When I had finished rebuilding the man, I turned the page and saw that I had rebuilt the world."

In the huge, terrifying and marvelous world in which we live, every true reform first begins with construction, a person's education: acts that become habits; ideas that become convictions; habits and convictions that forge character.

Much wisdom is necessary to make decisions, to test ideas, to straighten one's habits and strengthen one's character in order to educate and build in a lasting way. A lot of wisdom is necessary to educate well and even more to better build up oneself.

For the believer, this wisdom is a gift from God that is obtained in answer to the prayer of faith (see James 1:5, 6).

We are invited to become what we should be, allowing God to rebuild us, step by step. You are invited to join the project with the guide to "self-management" that you have in your hands.

Enjoy the journey!

DESID

Desiderata

by Max Ehrmann (1872-1945).

Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence.

As far as possible without surrender be on good terms with all persons.

Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others,

even the dull and the ignorant; they too have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons, they are vexations to the spirit.

If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter; for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.

Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans. Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.

Exercise caution in your business affairs; for the world is full of trickery. But let this not blind you to what virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals; and everywhere life is full of heroism.

ERATA

Be yourself. Especially, do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment it is as perennial as the grass.

Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth.

Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.

Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself. You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here.

And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be, and whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul.

With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world.

Be cheerful.

Strive to be happy.

1 God is (Genesis 1:1)

God is the Alpha and the Omega. He is the foundation, source and matrix of life—particularly of the believer’s life and his or her self-management, stewardship of that life. This is the foundational principle for these reflections on our self-management.

Self-management is the balanced development of all of our faculties. It is not salvation by works, rather it is a process of growth that comes as a result of living out salvation and our faith in God through Christ.

Those who do not make salvation part of their lives live with indifference, anxiety and emptiness. Accordingly, a Christian will not be satisfied by the world’s way of living in wickedness and even despair. We will acknowledge our sinfulness but, even if personal demons try to convince us that it is simply our nature, our response will be that our growth is found in God.

Our self-management will encounter difficulties and painful obstacles. However, in recognizing God as our God, life as His steward will also include confidence, reassurance, gratitude, love, joy and even jubilation that come from Him. From Creation, self-management describes each one of us as God’s personal project of love.

We do not view stewardship as a sad duty. For those in love with God, it is part of His works, revelations and creation.

Having been formed “in the beginning” by God of flesh and blood with needs, desires, conscience, social and intimate relationships, personal and collective history, instincts and culture, we are still expected to improve ourselves, stretching our limits and spirituality.

Therefore, self-management can be viewed as growth and development that brings spiritual fruit in many facets of our lives. Accordingly, in this devotional, we insist on specific real-life situations. We suggest practical answers to facilitate the experience of God’s presence in your life and relationships, as you begin the real journey of self-development and stewardship.

Reflect:

- Who is God to you? List in order of importance attributes you recognize in Him and what consequences these have for your life.
- What changes might take place in your life as you acknowledge God as the One in Whom you totally trust?



2 | In the image of God (Genesis 1:26, 27)

“In the beginning,” the Bible tells us, man and woman were created “in the image of God” (see Genesis 1:26, 27). But what does this mean? Scripture points out that God is a living and personal God. Therefore, humans are also living beings who are constantly developing. As living beings, we have potential, possibilities and talent—even after the Fall. This is a gift of grace that makes it possible to live with nobility.

A person created in the image of God is unique and precious, beyond any of the wonders of the world and this priceless individual is therefore entitled to our full attention. If wisdom (see Proverbs 3:13-15) and “the pearl of great price” (see Matthew 13:45, 46) are worth so much sacrifice, should we not then say that everyone who is a candidate for the eternal kingdom should dedicate intelligence, enthusiasm and perseverance to their growth? What a noble and stimulating task it is to become involved in a person’s growth.

Recognizing we are unique individuals, we do not have to compare ourselves to another in terms of right, wrong, superiority or even ethics. Each individual will have different starting points, objectives and growing patterns. One person cannot be the standard by which others are evaluated. Each person will think and grow in freedom as God’s child. Our focus is on the importance of this growth. Remember, the only things we will take into the kingdom of heaven will be our personality and individuality. What an exciting challenge to grow into the image of God.

A person is always a being in relationship with God, self, other people and our communities. This capacity for respectful encounters is one of the major aspects of self-management. This is reassuring, because we recognize we are not alone, yet challenging because we are always afraid of the other—those who are different from us. While this might be unconscious, we need to recognize it and overcome it.

We do not want to be just average or reduced to another number in a crowd. Instead, we want to aspire to a high level of self-

realization, expressing ourselves to the best of our ability in areas such as arts, sports, morality, relationships and vocational pursuits. This will not always be easy, yet it is an enthralling perspective and goal.

Reflect:

- Do I consider myself superior to others?
- What effect does this have in my relationships with others?
- Does this encourage collaboration?
- How can I grow in this part of my life and relationships?

3

3 But the godly will flourish (Psalm 92:12)

We cannot manage a relationship, budget, garden, factory, kindergarten class or the driving of a bulldozer in the same ways. So it is with each person we meet, each with his or her own life and experience. But there is no life without growth and key to self-management is managing and tending that growth.

There are many Bible texts that speak of growth.* Jesus also gives us a growth model—“in wisdom, in stature and in grace” (see Luke 2:52). He taught the importance of seed growth from germination to the harvest and reminded us that the smallest seed could become a large tree with much fruit.

The Bible also compares the new convert to a newborn baby, needing spiritual milk and then solid food for its growth. It also exhorts us to become adults—to grow into the stature of the fullness in Christ.

Focusing on growth, emphasis is placed on the powerful, irreplaceable and marvelous dynamism of life. God has placed a germ of life in human beings, as in a grain of wheat or a palm tree.

However, this germ is specific. The grain of wheat will become an ear of wheat; a hen’s egg will bring forth a chicken; and the fertilization of the mother’s ovum by the father’s spermatozoid will make a baby.

How ordinary—yet how extraordinary—and despite scientific discoveries this process remains a mystery. For example, how can a cell be genetically rich but undifferentiated, not yet blood, muscle, bone or nerve but with potential to become all of that and even more? However, even if we don’t understand it, we can see the result. In the same way, Jesus will allow a person through His Word, Spirit and life to grow spiritually, and develop the palette of his or her physical, intellectual, emotional and moral faculties.

Qualitative growth is a fundamental reality of all life. A person who is no longer growing is said to be sick, possibly dead. On

the other hand, a growing, living person is capable of nourishing himself or herself as they assimilate the necessary material, energy and information that will contribute to what is becoming part of them and their growth.

The living being is capable of growth, differentiation and diversity. He or she is a breathing being, able to work, communicate and have relationships with others and their environment. He or she will be able to adapt to a world plagued by evil and death, and yet be able to defend and care for themselves and their offspring. Humanity is able to do this within the elements of time, reflection, culture, love and transcendence. How great and magnificent is the program of growth and self-management!

Reflect:

- What is required for the germination and growth of a plant?
- What are the similarities with human growth?

*Read the following Bible texts that talk about growth: Proverbs 4:18; Matthew 6:28, 13:30; Luke 1:80, 2:52, 12:27; Acts 19:20; 1 Corinthians 3:6, 7; Ephesians 4:15; Colossians 1:10; 1 Peter 2:2; 2 Peter 3:18.

4 To tend and care for (Genesis 2:15)

God told Adam to “subdue the earth” (see Genesis 1:28). This command indicates a growth plan proposed to Adam that seems complex, all-encompassing and therefore necessitating management. After thousands of years of sin, these words might sound cruel, negative or even anti-ecological. But if we understand that this management program comes from an all-loving God, we will comprehend it as a positive duty of trust, responsibility and survival.

If one is to have better results, the manager must first manage him- or herself. Human beings are both the subject and the object of the management they have been entrusted with. Simultaneously, they are the resource to manage and the managers.

From this perspective, it is a gift rather than a loan that we have been asked to manage. Therefore, how could we ask others to accept this management, if we do not accept it for ourselves? Would this indicate a double standard? Or might this imply rights without obligations? Adam’s confrontation with the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil demonstrated his limits as well as the psychological, moral and spiritual conditions of his “dominion.”

After sin and having become domineering at their worst, people were no longer qualified for this mission. However, salvation through Christ provides the opportunity to begin our rehabilitation and our experience of humility. Again, we are offered an extraordinary opportunity to become managers of the gifts God has given us. Like Adam, the first gift we have to take care of is our secret garden—to care about ourselves in the light of the cross, to cultivate our character.

Affirming this necessary investment of ourselves, let us look more deeply into the meaning of the words “manage” and “management.” Like the word “gesture,” they derive from the ancient Latin word *gerere*, meaning “to take upon oneself.” The subject has its own activity, its own role in this “management.”

To speak of self-management—or stewardship—is to speak of the wholistic development of the human being in a very special

way. This development cannot happen at random or through circumstances without any responsibility. Rather it affirms principles to discover and implement. For example, the message of the book of Proverbs indicates the use of common sense, discernment and the use of wisdom. Therefore, self-management implies a plan of action, methods, teaching abilities, know-how, willingness, consistency, intelligence, time, self-giving and generosity.

Reflect:

- Am I aware how others—parents, teachers, organizers and friends—have contributed to my growth?
- Do I accept the responsibility to utilize and share what I have received and developed?
- Where am I in the journey that involves a caring God in the development of my person and relationships?

5 | The garden (Genesis 2:8, 15)

God created the Garden of Eden and entrusted it to the first people. What a beautiful image of balanced and fruitful cooperation between God and humanity, between the dynamic of life and the judiciousness of techniques, between growth and management!

Growth and management complement and adjust to each other mutually. Growth adds life to management when the latter is perceived as cold, full of technique, constraining or pretentious. However, self-management administers life, as well as creates it, while neglect will smother it. Growth is the remedy.

On the other hand, using the example of gardening, management corrects idyllic and passive concepts of growth, that—for example—human beings have nothing to do since God cares for everything. Yet we all know that if the gardener is not active, weeds will sprout everywhere!

Both growth and management have their truth and limits when considered alone. In accepting both, we have a more harmonious and efficient view of the mission. This is what Jesus taught when He said that a vine had to be pruned in order to bear more fruit (see John 15:2).

The metaphor of the garden helps us understand the interaction between God and people. The human mind, with its prejudices, has a tendency to disassociate realities, to oppose and confront them. This is a wrong and harmful way to settle problems, and limits cooperation.

We often confront grace and law, nature and culture, innate and acquired, the role of God and the role of humans, as if our undertaking would diminish God's glory, when it embodies it. God's Word is bold enough to associate the two in an interactive way. The qualities of one element—a seed—combined with the qualities of another element—the gardener's expertise—will make a perfect garden, a blessing, a fully fledged work achieved by God and humanity.

This leads to another principle: fertility and efficiency are not

mutually exclusive. Rather they work in collaboration. Would a pious person criticize what he or she considers “activism”? Let them meditate on Proverbs 6:6. Would an active person be tempted to despise what he or she considers “mysticism”? Let them think about the lesson of Psalm 127:2. This “complementariness” implies respect for others, fills the gaps or the excesses of each position, and generates a mutual enrichment. Would this not be the ideal of the Garden of Eden?

Reflect:

Read Proverbs 6:6 and Psalm 127:2.

- What attitude is closest to mine?
- How can I better appreciate the attitudes of others?
- Am I effectively God’s partner in my personal growth and that of my family or church?

6 Like a tree (Psalm 1:3)

Metaphors of plant life and growth are common in the Bible. In Psalm 1:3, we are told that the righteous “are like trees planted along the riverbank.” Rooted in fertile soil, receiving energy from the sun, pruned as needed, the tree is fertile, beautiful and useful. It can fulfill its “calling” to be what a tree is created to be.

In the same manner, the righteous are rooted in humility and they draw from the living water of life. They grow toward God, giving shelter to those in need, finding joy in the Lord and His law. This is the way of maturity.

The Bible urges us to turn away from sin, but does not mention sin in an obsessive manner, giving sin an importance or power it does not possess. Instead, the righteous are concerned with water, sunlight, joy and communion with God, meditating on His will. A large tree might look immobile or passive, but do we realize that a tree does a phenomenal work? For example, a 30-meter (100-foot) tall tree draws up about a ton of water daily.

The central point of God’s will for us is that “we will be mature and full grown in the Lord, measuring up to the full stature of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

In contrast, Psalm 1:1 identifies our worst danger—walking, stopping, sitting and slowing down to a standstill, most probably in bad company. While this bad path taken by the sinners and ungodly is not described in detail, the one who recognizes this danger and avoids it will be happy.

But moral standard—a form of salvation by works—can trick us into thinking that not lying, not killing, not stealing are the most important things. We have to realize that before becoming an act, sin is a conception of life. What is worse than setbacks in our journey is the absence of a journey—slowing down, applying the brake, and falling asleep. Worst of all is not being alive, ceasing to grow, believing we have achieved success and become settled, satisfied, and stale. This is sinning against life.

God calls us to live, to come out of the state of confusion and

indifference we all encounter. This is why self-management is so important. Self-management is nothing less than sanctification, without which no one will be able to see the Lord.

Reflect:

- Where am I on the path to spiritual growth?
- What might be the next step I need to take to grow my spiritual commitment?



7 | A long journey of growth (1 Corinthians 10:11)

Happy is the *homo viator*—the person on a journey. Let us analyze the stages of this journey—as another metaphor of self-management—from the story of the Bible character Joseph (found in Genesis 37–50).

At the beginning of this story, Joseph is a tall and handsome 17 year old, who is gifted and sensitive (see Genesis 37). Yet, at this point he only has a little knowledge about life. Emotionally, socially and spiritually, he is still at an elementary stage of maturity. Having lost his mother at a young age, he is under his father’s influence. He is the consenting victim of an overwhelming love that makes him the preferred son of his father. He is also victim of the opposition of his half-brothers, who are organized in maternal clans. He offsets these circumstances by acting as an informer to his father and becoming a boaster.

At the end of this story, Joseph demonstrates enviable maturity (see Genesis 50). He is neither embittered nor blasé. He is a man. This does not mean he has no shadowy areas in his life. But Joseph has developed a balanced and dynamic personality, both emotionally and spiritually, as well as a sense of responsibility, knowledge of life, work capacity, love, kindness, self-control, generosity, and forgiveness. He has a family, and a successful professional life under difficult circumstances.

Joseph becomes a faithful steward for Egypt and for God at the highest level. In a humble and profound way, he discerns God’s will for his life. Therefore it is legitimate to consider him a prototype of human growth—and we can learn a lot from his story.

What was Joseph’s secret? This is both simple and difficult: it is called faith, obedience, piety, and faithfulness. To explore these elements of healthy spirituality, we will examine what constituted the inner framework of his life stewardship.

What are the laws and stages of life-long growth of the man presented in the Bible as “Jacob’s posterity”? These principles

and reference marks will become object lessons—helps, means, and objectives—for our faith, to shape, by God’s grace, our journey for His honor (see 1 Corinthians 10:11).

The aim of the following pages is to summarize, in the light of self-management, the formative moments in Joseph’s journey.

Reflect:

- Every project or undertaking usually encounters difficulties and obstacles. How do I face this kind of adversity?
- Do I succumb to difficulties or do I embrace challenges and opportunities for transformation in my attitude, actions and development?



8 Sins of immaturity (Genesis 37:1-8)

We are similar to Joseph in so many ways. At the age of 17, he is no longer a child and he knows this. Yet several subtle hints reveal his immaturity. Instead of finding self-esteem in his relationship with God or in his intrinsic value as a son, Joseph tries to find it in the substitutes of having a colorful coat, doing a different job from his brothers, bringing them food, but not shepherding, criticizing and reporting the actions of his brothers to their father. Like Joseph, we try to do our best, but mostly we fail.

Evil? Sin? Certainly—but one could also consider the matter from another perspective. This is not to justify Joseph or us. Quite the opposite, the intention is to have a more mature perspective.

To label an incorrect attitude as sin can only lead to sterile guilt feelings. For example, Joseph’s “sins” are not “voluntary”—they are not thought out and planned to be harmful. This is not an “evil wrong.” It is rather a childish act, a “not yet there,” a starting point with potential for growth.

We have to remember that God’s work in us—like life—does not begin at the highest point (see Proverbs 4:18). This is demonstrated in God’s creation. In the beginning, it started in the abstract and void and each day began in the evening, in darkness. Remember Adam was merely clay before becoming blood, muscle and bone. This is also demonstrated in the process of physical birth that is a slow differentiation throughout pregnancy. The human being before adulthood is a child. It is the same with emotional, intellectual and spiritual growth.

Joseph still has a close bond with his father. Not certain of his own feelings, Jacob is haunted by the traditional first-born’s right of inheritance and will cast his problems onto the next generation, causing confusion. His official and legal firstborn is Reuben but his sentimental firstborn is Joseph, the first son of the woman he loved.

A sincere love between father and son grows, yet is tainted by a relationship full of earned favor—the multi-colored coat, the

tale telling—reinforced by the absence of Joseph’s mother. But a parent has to choose between earning favor or educating. To be mature is to understand one’s role and needs as a parent and those of a child.

At this point, Joseph does not know who he is or where he stands in relation to his brothers. Is he the one before the last in chronological order or the first in his father’s love? Would it not have been more beneficial to Joseph’s maturity for his father not to encourage reporting on his brothers or even censure him for doing it? Only Joseph’s life experience would bring maturity.

The dawn of growth has periods of veiled discernment, when there is not complete darkness, yet there is not full light. Everything is still undifferentiated, confusing, vague, mixed: right and wrong, duty and desire, fantasy and reality, responsibility and guilt, inspiration and projection. It is the first stage, where one should not remain, but that conditions and determines the rest.

Reflect:

- What things do I use as a substitute for finding my value in a relationship with God?
- What do I see as having real importance or impact in my growth experience?

9 Discovering the Other (Genesis 37:18-24)

What will assist Joseph past this cocoon stage? What helps us grow, surpass our perplexities, become conscious of our needs, then satisfy or go beyond them?

The example of Joseph poses another question for which there is only one response: the Other. This is with a capital O, recognizing it is not a trite object but a person, experience or event that is essential and meaningful.

Who is the Other Joseph will be ultimately confronted with? Certainly not his father whose sentiments are too ambiguous. So the other key players in this story are his brothers—and God.

God is first to intervene, perhaps only indirectly through Joseph's dreams. The word "God"—absent from this chapter—is pronounced by Joseph when faced with temptation in Genesis 39:9. This is interesting but God is definitely present while seemingly masked. He can only be seen by faith. Later in the story, we are told that "the Lord was with Joseph and blessed him greatly. . . . The Lord was with him, making everything run smoothly and successfully" (Genesis 39:2,23).

As if playing this most important role from backstage, God is developing a plan to bring Joseph out of his comfort zone, his cocoon of immaturity. Reuben and his brothers in a tangible, ferocious and violent manner become those Others that Joseph has to confront. Joseph discovers this reality in a head-on clash with life: illusion, jealousies, hatred and conflict. What a contrast with his desires and selfish dreams.

Other people play a fundamental role in the life of an individual. For Adam, it was Eve. For Cain, it was Abel. For the newborn, it is his or her mother. Later the father, the siblings, and then the school, a friend, a first love, the religious community, the workplace, a spouse and children fill their roles in our lives.

By facing another person we are compelled to gauge and question ourselves. The other persons impose themselves as a different reality to come to terms with. This is a kind of transcendence,

particularly so when coming from God. It is a face-to-face reality test and evaluation that helps us from being the only focus of interest. Child psychology has shown that the capacity to move away from ourselves in order to concentrate on someone else is the only direct way to progress in development and training.

This indispensable vague and fuzzy first stage of growth will be jostled by discovering the Other. From then on the person is about to begin his second stage.

Reflect:

- Who is the Other—a person, event or experience—seemingly opposing me and my projects, from whom I might grow and benefit?
- When Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6), what did He have in mind? Are there any connections between His life and mine? How?
- Am I able to accurately rate my personal self-esteem? If it is low, how can I reinforce it? If it is too high, how can I make more room for the Other?

10

A conflict that strengthens (Genesis 49:24)

Humans are relational beings but we can refuse to encounter others. To do this is to reject life, condemn ourselves to living alone or to not live at all. This is essentially refusing to know God's plan for our lives. One of the reasons we turn down encounter is that relationships prompt us to question ourselves. Many people react the same way to the offer of a relationship with God.

In a radical way, Cain preferred to eliminate Abel in order to avoid relationship, choosing instead to exploit and attack the other. In addition to murder, it was psychological and spiritual suicide. Alternatively, the other may want to eliminate you—this is the painful case of Joseph. However, unlike Cain, who turned his back on a wholistic life, Joseph chose to build an extraordinary life with God.

In our sinful world, relationships always involve conflict. We may not notice such conflict at first, as in the case of a first encounter with God or in the first stages of courtship or friendship. Yet as human beings, created free, having our own will and personality, our initially-idyllic relationships may result in differences and confrontation. This is normal. What is not normal is when we transform these conflicts into all-out war or are not willing to surmount them and move forward. Joseph was able to do this.

However, this is a long journey. To undertake this journey is to accept relationships as the raw materials of real life. This is why it is important to know how to develop relationships in constructive ways for others and for us. We must do away with childish idealism and accept that we live in a world potentially full of conflict that may wound us. This journey is a discipline, an education.

If we break everything at the first sign of disagreement in a relationship, we will not grow. We may emerge from a solved conflict carrying our wounds, like Jacob at Peniel, yet we will be richer, more sensible and sincere. When facing life's accidents, we can learn to apply "life-saving gestures," as a first-aid worker

would put it, to successfully overcome obstacles. We need to especially learn how to manage the gifts we have.

In this respect, Joseph's experience is encouraging. At the end of his life, his father Jacob would say of him, "But his bow remained strong, and his arms were strengthened" (Genesis 49:24). If he was able to succeed despite the misfortunes he encountered, we can also surmount obstacles, provided we draw from the same inspiration—"the Mighty One of Jacob, the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel" (Genesis 49:24).

Each person chooses the adventure of life according to their freedom and in their style.

Reflect:

- How do I face conflict? What is my usual strategy: flee, avoid, violent confrontation, negotiation? How can I choose better responses?
- What is the difference between loneliness causing alienation or bringing fulfillment? What makes the difference?
- Am I aware that only the differences of others confront me with something new and an opportunity to learn and grow?

11

11 Stripped and blinded (Genesis 37:23, 24)

As Joseph is stripped of his beautiful robe and thrown into a pit, he is thrown from glaring light into relative darkness. Until his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he must have felt blinded. Being stripped and blinded are parables of what takes place at different times in our lives. There is no true spiritual life without facing and overcoming these tests.

Joseph's coat is a symbol of his childhood dreams of greatness and selfish ideas. His privileges, affections and self-confidence are possessions he boastingly relied on to build his existence (compare Luke 12:16-20).

Possessions and appearance are necessary things in our world but we must keep them in their right place, not turn them into means of salvation or opportunities for pretense or oppression. While perhaps more comfortable, it would be worse if God, life or others did not prompt us to understand this. These things can be great means of service but are evil masters. But learning this can be painful, as the story of Joseph illustrates.

Not being able to see or understand, being disoriented and at the bottom of a pit, losing one's value system is a terrifying situation. But this could be the beginning of a unique opportunity to encounter truth, divine light and real values compared to vanities.

Strangely enough, in many pagan myths, such as that of Oedipus, it is when man becomes blind that he sees. This was Paul's experience in his decisive turn around. This is also the end of Samson's story.

This does not mean God wants us to be blind or remain in this state. The Gospels contain sufficient stories of Jesus healing the blind that we should not question God's will in this respect. But "the essential is invisible" and as long as we have not experienced God's presence, the reality and superiority of His way, we lack something fundamental and cannot begin our journey with Him.

When Joseph is broken, naked and blind, when his understanding of things is blurred, he truly begins his journey. Only then is he ready to serve God, to grow, and to manage his life as a steward.

Reflect:

- Is there something I am not giving up in my life and that I have been battling against? What would happen if I were to accept this? Would I feel freedom?
- How do I view my past difficulties and mistakes? Am I aware of what they taught?
- Would I feel joy and pleasure at being in proximity to God Himself?

12 | **Another situation, another condition** **(Genesis 37:36)**

One can only imagine Joseph's anguish. Down in the pit, he may have thought his life would end at any moment. Instead, his death sentence was turned into slavery, making time become painfully meaningful to him. All human beings have to face the flight of time, the sting of absolute urgency, or the wear of duration.

We practice self-management in the present moment and opportunity, favorable or not, and in the dynamic or monotonous duration. Times of destruction as well as times of reconstruction come to each of us. Time for reflection, meditation and action are all desired times, taken from the flight of days. It is necessary to have a personal ethic of time for real self-management.

The wise man said, "There is a time for everything, a season for every activity under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). Without time for reflection, there is not intelligent and wise action. Without action, reflection is pointless and empty. Without meditation and prayer, our thoughts and actions lack an anchoring point of transcendence.

It is likely Joseph nurtured, practiced and explored these formative dimensions. Many things went on in his heart and through his mind on his way to Egypt. He used the time to analyze, evaluate, draw conclusions, make decisions, and review his perception of things, his attitudes toward himself and others. After the shock of his ordeal, he must have felt thankful to God that he was still alive.

It is mysterious how God's work in us uses the cooperation of our conscience and the Holy Spirit, using time for reflection before action. Only this inner process explains why Joseph was not depressed, hopeless, outraged, or hardened. Later text reveals a positive, energetic, efficient, and reliable young man. This is what he became because he allowed God to mold him.

Sold to the Ishmaelites, Joseph experienced the impact of connection and disconnection from places: places of love and intimacy where one can grow, as well as to places of conflict

where one is distressed, strange places where one feels alone, abandoned or exploited. Soon he would find other places where he would be acknowledged for what he was becoming—a man able to work, build, exercise responsibilities, and create reciprocal trust (see Genesis 39).

When a person accomplishes his or her duty in a given place or responds to God’s expectations, his own expectations and those of his or her environment, “the Lord is in this place” (Genesis 28:16), even if the person is unaware of it. It is a step toward the promised land:

In the crisis of his life, when making that terrible journey from his childhood home in Canaan to the bondage which awaited him in Egypt, looking for the last time on the hills that hid the tents of his kindred, Joseph remembered his father’s God. He remembered the lessons of his childhood, and his soul thrilled with the resolve to prove himself true—ever to act as became a subject of the King of heaven. . . . Loyalty to God, faith in the Unseen, was Joseph’s anchor. In this lay the hiding of his power (Ellen G White, *Education*, pages 52, 54).

Reflect:

- Am I aware that I am in a process of growth and do I accept this idea regardless of my age, past or present situation?
- Can I accept with patience and compassion my past erring ways while remaining determined with God’s help to achieve my objectives?
- Can I be confident in misfortune, like Joseph?

13 Trust in relationships (Genesis 39:4)

Trust is the foundation of excellence that allows our life structure to withstand the worst earthquakes. Joseph benefited from this confidence.

Joseph had confidence in God and, on his way to Egypt, probably sent up many fervent prayers to God. In order to grow, it is vital to develop a relationship of proximity, dialogue, exchange, and communion with our heavenly Father. This is the basis.

Like us, Joseph also needed to be trusted. In His love, God allowed the trust He had in Joseph to be confirmed and experienced by a concrete human presence. Early in life, Joseph had his mother's confidence. Then he had his father's trust, amid the complexity of the family circumstances. The unclear emotions of his father projecting on him his own sibling rivalry, put Joseph in the position of a child-king through attitudes of earning or "buying" favor that tainted a healthy educational relationship.

So Joseph's first relationship of true confidence as an adult would take place with a foreigner. Potiphar made him overseer of his household and entrusted to his care all of his business dealings (see Genesis 39:4). This authentic paternal figure became for Joseph an opportunity to develop his gifts and strengthen a balanced self-esteem.

The contemporary understanding of resilience helps us explain this. Resilience is the capacity of an individual to rebound and reconstruct a normal life after being battered by life. For example, a child who has been a victim of abandonment, cruelty, witness of violence or taken hostage is able to have a balanced existence, and develop an aptitude for happiness, contrary to all expectations. Researchers studying the subject of resiliency note that, among other things a "broken" child needs to become a resilient adult, he or she will need to meet people who will trust them.

This is why the first relationships an infant has with his mother and father are important. Nothing can replace it. Later, in contact with people in the community, and especially with those in the church community, he or she will be able to create strong

relationships of esteem, respect, support and trust. A parent, brother, sister, pastor, teacher, spouse, friend, colleague or chance acquaintance can play a crucial role in someone's life, even unconsciously.

Everyone needs trust—the one trusting and the one being trusted. As fibers of wood that are alive, resistant, and flexible give strength and flexibility to the tree that is shaken by the wind, so trust gives the basic structure to self-management.

Reflect:

- Do people trust me easily?
- According to what criteria do I grant my trust? Is this a spontaneous attitude or choice?
- What is my position in regard to God's promises?

14

14 Overcoming temptation (Genesis 39:7–20)

The Bible does not only present rosy and ideal stories. It was not enough that Joseph learned lessons from his painful experience, to enter into a time of reflection and action, or be trusted by his adoptive father resolving everything magically. No! What's at stake here are the process, the concept, management, growth, maturity—and these take time. This is the hard law of life.

Up to this point, Joseph faced difficulties that were mostly outside himself. Now, he faces a temptation with strong inner reverberations. Sexual harassment from a woman in power toward a young man is not easily dealt with. What is remarkable is that Joseph was clear-sighted enough not to limit this to a human level.

His strength was to see the origin of the challenge as spiritual. His integrity and respect for his master guided him to a more important principle—his commitment to his heavenly Father. Until now, the Lord had been present only in the writings of the narrator. For the first time, God is present in the words of Joseph: “How could I ever do such a wicked thing? It would be a great sin against God” (Genesis 39:9). Having a sense of the divine is one of the important secrets of self-management and stewardship.

Beyond this intense temptation are temptations of all sorts that stand out on the horizon of humanity's struggle. Self-management is a fight for whatever is good, true, and just (see Micah 6:8). At the same time, it is a fight to understand ourselves, to discover the stakes of a voluntary life with God, and come to know the ground of confrontation and conquest.

Joseph did not stop at the principle of pleasure, as he did when he boasted about his dreams. He chose and maintained values that enabled progress. Joseph understood the lesson. As a result, evil befell him again but, in the world as we know it and in the economy of sin, evil is a revealer. While we should not have spiritual pride or pretense that plays out sainthood or heroism and not search for confrontations, we cannot escape some

confrontations. Yet, as a child of God living without cowardice, we should be assured that victory is in Christ.

In order to develop our character, we must endure, to stand firm, to resist, to prayerfully seek the Spirit of God. Did not Christ Himself endure temptation, being led into the wilderness by the Spirit (see Mark 1:12)?

Reflect:

- What is the nature of my struggle with the tempter?
- Can I today—with God’s help and all my will power—hope to overcome a temptation that I usually succumb to?
- If in a situation of duplicity, lying and infidelity, I feel God’s appeal for more integrity, should I not commit myself for good, while dealing fairly with those whom I have hurt?

15 Integrating the forbidden (Genesis 39:9)

From a moral standpoint, Joseph's story obviously condemns lust and adultery, and depicts much from a symbolic point of view about the make up of human beings. Beyond the ethical setting, this story establishes the spiritual principle of mutual respect and non-confusion between generations.

Life is future oriented. It is abnormal for someone to impose abusive sexual power on a person of a different generation. As far as sexuality, Joseph had bad examples. Had not his brother Reuben slept with his step-mother (see Genesis 35:22)? Then there's the story of Judah and his step-daughter, Tamar (see Genesis 38), with its condemnation of adultery and prostitution. These stories are so disturbing that we may be tempted to stop there, without trying to see beyond the surface.

Before being moral, sin is the rupture of a spiritual relationship. Thus Reuben and Judah's sins—one with the former generation and the second with the next generation—are against genealogy. They are exactly the opposite of God's plan.

Biblical genealogies are important not only as historical landmarks but also as spiritual ones. They are vital leads coming from God—and Adam—to Jesus, the second Adam. When the Bible mentions Jacob's genealogy in Genesis 37:2, we expect to read that "Jacob fathered so and so who fathered so and so . . ." but, unique in all genealogy, what follows is Joseph's story—a true spiritual and Christological genealogy.

This spiritual principle of blood lineage and against incest is found in many different cultures. It is the condemnation of deadly ways that are immature, unfruitful, lifeless and without a future. The course of history—of human action—is to flow with time, not trying to go back into time. The course of history is to flow toward the future, not to the past—not to an Eden, a past maternal breast or to a wrongfully acquired heir's blessing. Such decisions and actions are completely opposite of what God is expecting of humanity.

On the other hand, to be true to the eternal laws doesn't mean to be stuck in what was done in the past. We do not need to dress like Jesus, to think like people in the Middle Ages or to try to maintain 19th-century norms in the 21st century. Such efforts or ideas are not proof that we are serious nor consecrated. It could also be the refusal to assume one's freedom, responsibility or human nature. Instead, faithfulness in our time and place is the living adaptation and integration of human's needs and God's kingdom values.

So, he probably wasn't aware of the significance of his decision, but it was the refusal to go against humanity's future. In his time and place, Joseph refused to sin against God (see Genesis 39:9).

Joseph could have made an easier and more profitable decision—accepting the advances of Potiphar's wife—but he chose to turn around toward his future. Paradoxically, this was also toward jail but this is preferred to a betrayal and most of all was a step toward moral freedom.

Reflect:

- How do my personal ethics compare with Christ's stand on the law of God and James' statements on the law of love and liberty (see James 1:25)?

16 Beyond the feeling of injustice (Genesis 39:20)

Joseph acted honorably but found himself in prison once again. Adding to his physical imprisonment is moral isolation, spiritual trouble, questions without response—“Why me?”—and, above all, the raging feelings of injustice.

Few emotions are as impetuous and destructive as feelings of injustice. Uprightness is badly rewarded in this world governed by force. One could desire to be strong and, in a case of legitimate defense, be tempted to retaliate. Temptations and uncontrolled impulses mount up in us. This is understandable for an unbeliever—but these feelings should not exist in a Christian.

Apparently, nothing of this nature was in Joseph. “The Lord was with him” (Genesis 39:21) is testimony to the blessing of inner peace. There is little detail in the narration but, if the prison warden noticed Joseph, it was because divine protection was not nullified by revengeful and unproductive behavior. This gives us precise indications on how to exercise self-management—stewardship—in periods of great difficulties. With God’s help and by faith, it is possible to alleviate and expel the grief of injustice.

Dealing with this delicate subject, let us dare to go further and consider it from a larger perspective. First, it is necessary to ensure the feelings of injustice are well founded and not an illusion on our part. Without succumbing to paranoia that leads us to believe we are persecuted, we need to avoid inventing fictional or exaggerated injustices. Overcoming this—if that is possible—when faced with an unjust accusation, let us not hesitate to cry out to God. In similar circumstances, Job received through prayer and with a demanding conscience the assurance that he was “just”—at least on this point.

In many senses, Joseph is a prototype of Christ and it is to Christ that we should turn for help. Christ the scapegoat suffered numerous and horrible injustices and false accusations, climaxing in His death on the cross—a torment inflicted not on

blasphemers but on common bandits.

How did Jesus respond? He prays for His accusers: “Father, forgive these people, because they don’t know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). He looks beyond His present injustices to the infinitely terrifying prospects of His murderers concerning eternal life.

Thanks to Christ, His help and His Spirit, we can fight against the feelings of injustice and be even stronger than Joseph. Asking Christ for His help and His Spirit will enable us to fight victoriously.

Reflect:

- I have the right to feel angry while undergoing an authentic injustice, but how can I live out this anger as a disciple of Christ? How is this response influenced by my temperament, my strengths and weaknesses?

17 Spiritual maturity, an attitude against evil (James 1:13)

We are far from being finished with addressing injustice and evil, whether in our everyday struggles or our nagging mental interrogations. As we await the final victory of the second coming of Christ, it is a good test of spiritual maturity to know where we stand in our hearts concerning this mystery.

The prayer of Jesus on the cross (Luke 23:34) parallels one of the beatitudes, “God blesses you when you are mocked and persecuted and lied about because you are my followers” (Matthew 5:11). We need not be delighted *with* injustice—this would be unhealthy theology—but *in* injustice. “Remember, it is better to suffer for doing good, if that is what God wants, than to suffer for doing wrong!” (1 Peter 3:17).

Despite a person’s suffering, the “just” are on the right track. This is the motive for rejoicing. Having full knowledge of the consequences, if we had to choose between two paths, which one would we choose: that of persecutors committing injustices or that of the faithful who endure them? There have been many people who, without reference to faith in God, have preferred at the cost of their lives to take a stand for freedom and dignity, for what they believe to be truth against tyranny. Therefore, a Christian making this choice is doing nothing extraordinary.

More than the opinion of men whose conscience is either darkened or delinquent, what must count for us is what God thinks. This led Paul and Silas to sing in jail (see Acts 16:25). This does not eliminate the injustice or liberate Joseph from jail, but it soothes the burning heart. Often we are hurt by the appearance rather than the reality of things. The thought of God’s presence and approval, the superiority of His justice to the injustices of men is like an armor (see Ephesians 6:10–20) that in the light of faith turns temptation into a test (see verse 18).

When hurt, many Christians can hardly resist such negative thoughts: “Why does God allow me to suffer?” or simply “Why me?” These thoughts are certainly human, yet unworthy of Jesus Christ (see James 1:13).

A believer does not benefit from a different status from that of others. Instead, in our world of misery and death, everything reacts to the law of heredity, by solidarity or other mechanisms in evil as well as in good. A person's maturity implies an intellectual, theological dimension, and reflects on real life and its laws that cannot be bypassed. That is to say, it sees a non-magical "just" vision of God's intervention.

Reflect:

- When I am embittered, reactive and even violent toward another person, do I stop to reflect that this attitude may not be of any help, considering that my need, though abused or neglected by the other person, is only transient and must evolve and lead to Christ?

18 From difficulty to test (James 1:2–4)

James 1:2–4 helps us understand the spiritual experience hidden in Joseph's remarkable journey. James uses three words to describe the possible influence of an event and its repercussion in life: trial (see James 1:2,12), test (see James 1:3, 12), and straying (see James 1:6).

Trials are not intentional; diverse miseries come our way as part of what it means to live as a human being. They are common to everyone. These miseries—anxieties, obstacles, harassments, and perplexities—can cause us to either fall or deviate, so transitioning from trials to temptations.

Test may indicate an intention or examination. It is a person's response in faith to perceive an opportunity to search, an expectation that can become God's means to transform and qualify him or her. Once completed, the test is proof of a capacity that bears assessment and value, testifying to competence.

On the other hand, *straying* is a result of deception that confuses, bewilders and turns us into random beings. Straying is the outcome of seduction.

We all have difficulties and temptations. But James 1:13 clearly says God does not send them. This is life: Joseph's, Christ's and ours. What is our reaction to hurts? If we respond in violence to life's injustices by punitive actions, we increase the already sufficient amount of miseries for others and ourselves, transforming the difficulties into seduction. It is not irreversible, but it is prejudicial and sad. The seducer's spirit acts in us. We go astray and we deceive ourselves.

If, on the other hand, by God's grace we see through the eyes of faith that this difficulty can become an opportunity, a resource, then we are transforming dross into gold, temptation into test. In this sense, God is always behind tests.

To see in this text an apology for masochism is a serious misunderstanding. We do not have to rejoice because of difficulties. If we could see them as tests, like Joseph, the Lord is with us (see Genesis 39:21). By the victory of faith and that

alone, we can view trials “as subject of complete joy.”

Through endurance, this vision enables us to be perfected, mature and accomplished. We are at the heart of the self-management stewardship issue: growing toward maturity.

Reflect:

- Can this week’s meditation become an opportunity to review my past journey without fear or sadness as I outline difficulties experienced, obstacles, dilemmas and search for their meaning, noting both the positive and negative outcomes?
- Can this become an opportunity for me to assess God’s presence in my life, to praise Him and prepare a special offering?

19 In the worst situations, unexpected resources (Genesis 39:21–23)

The prison warden noticed Joseph’s personality and behavior. As a result, he was entrusted with greater responsibilities, and continued to develop his expertise and mold his character.

We often have the tendency to complain about the environment we live in: a secularized world seemingly removed from God, difficult working conditions, harshness of relationships, struggles for life, and a materialistic society. Our world is far from paradise.

Yet Joseph was in a worse situation than many of us, proof that the most difficult environments should neither discourage us nor serve as excuses. Instead, these circumstances could be opportunities for growth; we can transform difficulties into resources. Here in this “prison” where sin abounds, God invites us to make the grace of self-management more abundant.

Sometimes with reason, we may blame churches, families and communities where we live for our problems. However, they too are opportunities and resources for growth. If we wait for ideal conditions to do something, we risk never doing anything.

While we are not to imitate our environments without discernment (see 1 Thessalonians 5:21), our human, religious, cultural, literary, artistic, technical, sporting environments do contain values and beauties. Often these are instructive and enriching, and can strengthen and train us. Is the perseverance of an athlete or artist in order to achieve the perfect execution of a gesture or a musical performance not admirable? The efficiency of the sciences and techniques convey great lessons in humility. Does the Christian invest as much energy, knowledge and willingness for the eternal objectives of stewardship?

People of the Bible and great Christians in history often integrated with their environment in successful ways. Many writers of Scripture—like John and Paul—were inspired by vocabularies, images and teachings of their period taken from philosophers to explain the gospel in a language adapted to their readers.

One of the many lessons from the story of Joseph is that we should have less fear of the world around us and less defensive reactions, yet more audacity in the construction of our humanity, character and action.

Reflect:

- What is my attitude toward the “world?”
- When I face my faith, am I spellbound, worried, overwhelmed or discouraged?
- Do I find faith a springboard to pursue my growth with God or do I tend to turn inward and deprive myself of important interactions with the world around me?

20 | **Whatever your hand finds to do (Ecclesiastes 9:10)**

Joseph knew how to be efficient, utilize his abilities and be involved with people. In prison, he interpreted the chief butler's dream and asked to be remembered (see Genesis 40:14). Later, before Pharaoh, he proved to be an astute advisor. He knew it was not necessarily a proof of faith to wait passively for the goodness of the Lord. As has been said, "God gives us nuts, but He does not crack them for us!"

Quietism is not the biblical ideal. Cooperation and collaboration better describe the joint actions of God and His people. Each one has—not his or her "share" to do, as we so often wrongly say—his or her role to play, a function to fulfill. God acts as creator and redeemer, mastermind, and source of strength, forgiveness, revelation, truth and His will. It is up to humans to be God's workers (see 2 Timothy 2:15), craftsmen realizing the divine project by faith and in collaboration.

There cannot be cooperation if the steward does not deeply invest personally in his or her project. Joseph's spirituality was not disembodied or detached from material contingencies; on the contrary, it integrated them.

Remember how quickly the child grows physically and mentally. At first, he or she assimilates whatever is presented to them: food, sounds, images, shapes, presence of objects and beings, rhythms, words and language structures, and complex laws of the environment. For example, if a moving object disappears behind another object, he or she does not take long to realize the toy has not stopped existing, it will reappear on the other side. The child's eyes anticipate the place and time of reunion; their laughter shows the satisfaction of a gratified wait. How would a child learn language and life if he or she did not receive all this information in a positive and active manner, or refused them?

After assimilation and adaptation, one speaks of accommodation. The child transforms milk into living tissue, and information into intelligence; they gain weight, grow up, act, respond, imitate, invent, concentrate, laugh and play. They express joy,

satisfaction or sorrows, and repeat the same gestures, enabling the laws of life God engraved in his or her genes and cells to bear fruit.

In the same manner, a person develops his or her inner being and personality. By assimilating what surrounds us, by constant and active intelligence and critical adaptation, by trial and error, by identifying with valid models, by avoiding disastrous courses, by modifying what is dissatisfying and improving what is positive, we ready ourselves to give our vocation its full measure.

Reflect:

- Am I fully committed—at a 100 per cent level—in whatever I undertake in my involvement with domestic, professional, and church life? Or do I resist, always ready to withdraw, to limit myself as soon as things do not go completely as I wish they would?

21 | **Joseph and management** **(Genesis 41:33–36)**

What is God’s role and what is the human’s role? The reflections in these pages cannot be substituted for the indispensable riches of a personal, family and communal religious life. These experiences teach us about the work of God and salvation. But these lessons would be greatly incomplete if they failed to consider our role. At this level, our approach will enrich our regular spiritual life and reveal a deeper, more important range of action.

The crux of Christian stewardship and self-management encapsulates the need to question the human role and the aspects of his or her development from a more technical angle. Faith first implies a quest for Christ, acceptance and obedience. Second, faith needs an action plan that results in faithful and persevering application, by concrete methods and appropriate disciplines.

This is what we find in Joseph’s dialogue with Pharaoh (see Genesis 41:33-36). Inspired by God, Joseph refuses a magical solution and proposes a technical solution: management. Joseph shows himself to be an extraordinary management advisor, who after Pharaoh took him at his word proved to be a no less remarkable manager.

There are some obvious stages to this form of management that we can see in Joseph’s story:

1. Evaluation (or audit) of the situation and resources;
2. Perspective: the higher the level of the decision, the more the forecast must be long term. In Joseph’s case, this was a 14-year span;
3. Clarification of goal with someone responsible;
4. Plan of action, including definition of his expertise and background check;
5. Methodology;
6. Ensuring determination and means—in this case, economic and political—to set it up; and

7. Follow up.

This model can be applied to the everyday life of a business enterprise, a community, a family, or an individual. Without it, efficiency is often reduced or eliminated. For example, why are many church-run programs to help others stop smoking so successful? The expertise and devotion of the instructors are necessary. But these factors would not do much if they were not in the service of an action plan—well built, wise, programmed, progressive, and methodical—and with precise goals and concrete means to succeed.

In the same way, self-management needs a careful life plan. Such a plan will become a process of growth and development that is rich in itself and a pathway to eternal life.

Reflect:

- Do I have a growth plan in the spiritual, professional, educational, athletic, emotional and dietary areas of my life?
- Do I set up goals and commit the means with time, tools and resources to reach them?
- Do I also ensure the means to evaluate my progress toward these objectives?

22 | Rejecting magic (Genesis 41:46–49)

Joseph’s plan to deal with famine does not surprise us. Yet, when one thinks about it, it was extraordinary and went against the spirit of magic and superstitions so strong at the time—and still strong today, unfortunately, even in some Christian communities.

While there is no mention in the Bible’s story, it seems Pharaoh, his magicians and priests had not been able to impose religious manifestations, rituals, exorcisms, sacrifices, processions or whatever else they might have used to coax celestial powers and conjure fate. Despite Joseph being a foreigner and a prisoner, his solution—in conformity with God’s will—was adopted, enforced and proved effective.

Every religious community has in its history, pioneers who were men and women of faith and action. They were humble and had the wisdom to choose Joseph’s way rather than that of visionaries of other kinds. Charitable or educational institutions, literacy programs, missions, dispensaries and orphanages, multi-lingual translation of Scripture did not result from “magical” powers, which are too easily placed under the saintly banner of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit empowered our pioneers, motivated their actions and gave them vocations. In self-management as stewards, we must not forget the spirit of our founders.

Self-management must denounce solutions that deviate from Joseph’s plan, especially when they would “act as if they are religious” but deny its power (see 2 Timothy 3:5). Using proven methods is not a lack of faith, it is faith at work, wanting us to change in a spirit of obedience to God’s will so Christ, the perfect Man, will grow in us.

Applying oneself with prayer and consecration with all one’s might and intelligence is not presumption but taking divine guidelines seriously. On the other hand, despite the theological truth certain statements—such as “If God wants to change me, He can do it” or “We have nothing to do, God does everything”—may have in certain contexts, they are false and dangerous affirmations because they refer to a spirit of magic—a caricature of faith.

Working ceaselessly for seven years (see Genesis 41:47–49), Joseph invested himself totally to preventing misfortune in Egypt: “when Joseph left Pharaoh’s presence, he made a tour of inspection throughout the land” (Genesis 41:46).

The development of our character—a gift for the kingdom of heaven—the growth and maturation of our life, the edification of the body of Christ, the progress toward His perfect stature (see Ephesians 4:12, 13) are all expressions of the same thing: self-management, stewardship of our selves. Is it not worth as much and does it not merit the same application as the prosperity of Egypt?

Reflect:

- Can I specify the difference between the way of magic and that of Christ?
- Am I conscious of coming close to magic while trying to avoid my real responsibilities?
- Can I think that God will refuse to do what’s within my power to do, that He expects my real commitment, rejoices in my realizations, wonders at my successes, and also deplores my denials?

23 | Joseph was 30 years old (Genesis 41:46)

Christ began His public ministry at age 30, as did Joseph. By contrast, today, “maturity” usually describes the period between age 50 and retirement. But be careful: chronological age is not the ultimate factor.

A human being can be a responsible person at any age or at any age can act like a careless novice or an already-rigid individual. Besides, everyone is unique; there is no universal gauge for maturity. In short, maturity is not a completed state or end point. It is a process, a transforming, a progressive accomplishment never finished. Any attempt to give maturity a complete and definitive description would be immature!

Far removed from us, Joseph is a difficult model to imitate in a strict sense. However, his story is a good inspiration from which we may draw out dynamic, fertile, inventive, generous principles, and attempt to integrate them into our lives. There are several areas of life that are accessible to us: sentimental, conjugal, sexual, familial, material, professional, social, relational, intellectual and spiritual. Later, we will elaborate on a few elements from this list.

For the moment, let us consider the dark side of maturity and note some signs of deficiencies. This is not to discourage us; recognizing shortcomings are useful and even indispensable. Joseph’s story confirms this. We want to avoid the pride of believing we have “arrived.”

An exaggerated focus on “I” — the love of “I”, not to be confused with self-esteem or self-love which is almost the opposite — an excessive need for approval or attention, too much fear of the opinion of others, and anguish about failure can be signs of immaturity, especially if they are constant and not linked to temporary circumstances. Similarly, we should be alert to over-dependency on external factors like our parents, spouse, family, church work, food, sex or drugs.

When out of balance or appropriate context, feelings of independence or superiority, a need for competition or domination, intimidating attitudes, prejudices, incisive judgments

and a spirit of criticism suggest a low level of maturity. Maturity is a balance, a harmony.

When we observe, in ourselves or others, highly emotional attitudes—like sulking, anxiety, anger and rebellion, hatred, aggressiveness, boastfulness, bad moods, laziness, questioning, lack of stability—these can be insights into the need for maturity. When we have those moments of discernment, we should recognize them as a true blessing and an opportunity to (re)start the journey.

Reflect:

- What does it imply to approach a person or a situation as an adult, with maturity?

24 | **Asenath bore him two sons (Genesis 41:50)**

Joseph is ready. He is not perfect, but he is mature, ready to commit himself and be fruitful (see Genesis 41:52). Implicitly, he fulfills the conditions stated at creation (see Genesis 2:24). More than a simple geographical remoteness, this separation is distancing oneself. This is what grown-ups do when they are past the stage of dependence. They can make choices other than those out of caprice or of a passing craze. They can pursue these choices with perseverance and values, with a strong basis of social, financial, material and psychological existence. This growth is an important prerequisite for the achievement of sentimental maturity.

In the area of love and marriage, many societies today are very different from those generations preceding it. We have privileges and immense possibilities, at the same time as dramatic fragilities. What was perhaps simple in the days of our great-grandparents is called into question today.

Advantages? We have a personal choice for our love and relationships, with possibilities for expressing and blossoming of which our forefathers had no idea. For example, we have the means and opportunities to do passionate things together, such as spiritual, social, cultural, artistic and sporting activities.

Vulnerabilities? A longer partnered life and social stereotypes set the standards so high that they produce many frustrations. We also have access to many means of payment, travel, change and break-up. A society that advocates leniency and disregards perseverance turns our head and heart upside down, making us insensitive and unsuited for simple and true happiness. The anguish of deadlines has replaced the pleasure of wise, patient and constructive desires.

Learning mature ways in preparation for marriage and married life is important. This is the only training that will allow one to use the advantages to the maximum and provide against the fragilities. We can have the capacity to manage difficulties other than by argument, choosing to go beyond and endure. In

marriage, we can learn something of the motivational power of self-management.

This is particularly important for young people. Parents have the duty to educate their daughters about men, their sons about women, and both of them about a couple. It is much more than trivial anatomical or sexual information. It is an initiation to authentic fruitful communication and conflict management.

This might seem an impossible mission. But the relational and emotional obstacles signal that the major task depends on the silent and powerful communication of example. Communities need to consider this ministry seriously in the relational and spiritual maturation of a young couple.

Reflect:

- What is the maturation process of a couple?

25 He traveled throughout Egypt (Genesis 41:46)

Without wholistic maturity, emotional and marital maturity will not mean much. We also need physical, intellectual and professional maturity. Do we need to recall in detail Joseph's work and the seriousness, zeal, application, expertise, wisdom and intelligence he put into it?

First, it requires good health. Hereditary factors play a significant role but one can still improve on these by, for example, avoiding risk factors as much as possible. These include lifestyle issues such as alcohol, tobacco, drugs and other stimulants, being overweight, a sedentary lifestyle and stress.

Striving for a positive daily practice of a healthy and well balanced diet, hygiene, cleanliness, order, physical exercise and self-control is important. These things are far from being duties, restrictions or deprivations; they are an opportunity, choice, privilege, and a blessing. Don't forget gratitude but feast sometimes and have joy always.

Intellectual maturity also comes in many ways. Whether the sphere is literary or scientific, theoretical or practical, what is essential is the process, not the content. Enriching one's mind, cultivating wonder and joy, pondering and thinking before acting are vital disciplines.

This is what Joseph must have done while traveling throughout the country of Egypt. We need to be able to classify and differentiate important and urgent things from those that are not. Except in exceptional cases, we must give priority to important things—"emergencies" are often a trap. It is best to consider different solutions, analyzing and evaluating them.

It is important to set positive goals and plans for achieving them. We also need to learn to know ourselves and to change our minds, if need be, eventually modifying our plans in light of new information. Since intelligence cannot be separated from conscience, it is also about assuming our responsibilities and speaking the truth even when not accepted by others, cultivating

humor and humility.

Joseph's profile speaks much about professional maturity. It is beneficial to know one's profession intelligently and continuously improve it. Also important is respect for ethics, being organized, and being conscientious without becoming a workaholic. Being brilliant is not bad, but to be reliable is more useful and better rewarded. People who work alone and don't depend on anybody are rare, so professional maturity necessitates a certain relational and emotional maturity.

Reflect:

- What does it mean to build Christ's character in me through the Spirit? Is it instantaneous—at baptism, for example—or is it the challenge of a life time? Why?
- The book *Education* by Ellen G White constitutes a good development on this chapter.

26 Did you not know? (Genesis 44:15)

As prime minister of Egypt, Joseph exercised real power. But there are different kinds of power—and different ways of using it.

There is an indispensable power that is attached to a mandate, a function, or moral authority. In this noble sense, Jesus says, “All power is given to me” (see Matthew 28:18) and He delegates part of it to His disciples (see Luke 9:1). This is “power to”—to be able to do something good and to be.

However, human beings can corrupt this power to enslave others. “Power over” others and things is sometimes visible and tyrannical. But it can also be more subtle, hidden, even to the mind of the one exerting it under the mantle of duty, honor, or even vocation. It can also manifest itself as a will for influence, becoming a form of covetousness. This abuse of power can be seen at home, at work, in politics, in economy and industry, in all areas.

Take an average person and clothe him or her with a modest uniform and soon this detestable power springs up. Religions, the church and ecclesiastical communities are no exception. This thirst for power is at the origin of the quest for glory and money that produces gurus, divisions, maneuvers, manipulations, and other calumnies. It is the temptation to rise by degrading the other.

Joseph was not exempt from mischief, supposed divination and manipulation of his brothers. One might say it was for a good reason in order to prick their conscience and enable their repentance (see Genesis 42:21). Nevertheless, did this justify the means? The hidden cup in Benjamin’s sack represents this ambiguous use of power.

There is worse to come. Joseph exerts power over the Egyptians, little by little taking all their possessions for the benefit of the state and his own people—his family and the priests. We could justify this by invoking again the good intention, that the Egyptians themselves recognized he had “saved” them (see Genesis 47:25). After all, the tribal customs of that time considered some

nepotism as normal. Nevertheless, the narration gives a painful impression of harsh oppression. And Joseph does not seem to have qualms about it.

The Christian, who benefits from the revelation of the gospel, cannot legitimize such behaviors from his personal and social ethic. Joseph is not perfect or without sin; he has not escaped this human failing, despite his progress.

We might be disappointed and saddened. But we, even if not rejoicing, can at least find encouragement. On the one hand, Joseph reveals himself to be like us and, on the other, he points us to Christ as the perfect model. When men, despite their stature—such as Moses, David, Elijah, Peter, Paul and Joseph—reach their limits, only Jesus carries us higher and further.

Reflect:

- How do I use or abuse power in my life and relationships?
- Why does God seem to have special favor for the poor, the humble and the dispossessed?
- How can I modify my position to honor Him who gave up greatness for humility in order to elevate us all?

27 Restraint of emotions (Genesis 45:2, 3)

It is said that Christ wept once (see John 11:35) but it is recorded that Joseph cried seven times (see Genesis 42:24; 43:30; 45:14, 15; 46:29; 50:1) and that he sobbed (see Genesis 45:2). An eighth text (Genesis 50:10) speaks of heavy lamenting. Obviously, Joseph was a sensitive man, susceptible to emotions and also capable of controlling them up to a certain point (see Genesis 43:30).

Emotional maturity is an important component of self-management. It gives richness and perceptiveness to intellectual and relational life. However, badly managed, bullied, repressed emotions or exacerbated and uncontrolled emotions are traps. On one hand, there is coldness, drought and an absence of true life; on the other, the risk of exuberance, irrational convictions, and inconsiderate decisions or acts.

Emotional maturity is characterized by the ability to live with one's emotions. To recognize, admit, and accept them—not necessarily to approve of them completely—is important, but we must also be able to express them, observe them with attention and to recognize them and distance ourselves from them to some degree. To be able to accept their richness in art and writing, for example, is to be delighted and moved with constructive emotions.

Emotional maturity also includes knowing how to listen to what the more negative and less esthetic emotions tell us and learn how to manage those that regularly are a burden and stress. It is possible to learn how to express one's disappointments without being angry or sulking, to be sad without being desperate, to sincerely regret an unfortunate act without sinking into a sterile despair. It is possible to accept criticism without feeling deeply hurt while keeping what is useful.

To face difficult situations without shunning them and without being overwhelmed by fears and anxieties is a sign of emotional maturity. To have projects, desires, dreams, to compromise with reality and to build a life that has meaning is a grace we can pray for. We can, for example, build a balanced marital and family

life if circumstances allow or live a life of celibacy, chosen by vocation or imposed.

The absence of an inner structure can cause otherwise endearing people to drive those of good will to despair. Some people have no place, no calendar, no commitment, no will, no continuity in ideas, and seemingly no feelings. There is a difference between being original, free, creative, even bohemian, and that of destroying by impulsive action and instinctive behavior any offered opportunity. This is only to live an existence of expediency!

Emotional stability is often acquired in a family setting that provides love and direction. Nevertheless, the gospel can transform hearts and give great impetus, a second chance, and a new life.

Reflect:

- Emotions must express themselves freely yet our actions must not be determined by our emotions rather, by what is produced in us. Am I capable of emotional firmness and sensitivity?
- Can I live out my emotions without them overwhelming me and restrain them without denial? Which of my emotions is liveliest and which one is most repressed?
- Am I restricting the emotional expression of others—my children, for example?

28 He reassured them and spoke kindly to them (Genesis 50:21)

Joseph still has a problem: his brothers.

Three words characterize this last phase of his dealings with them: forgiveness, reconciliation and generosity. These are strong signs of relational and spiritual maturity.

Forgiveness refused is often the knot of many unresolved conflicts, of suffering, and of spiritual, moral, psychological and even physical illnesses. Granted forgiveness is liberation. Forgiveness frees a prisoner—and later we find out the prisoner was *ourselves*. Forgiveness is important for the other person, but first it is so important for *ourselves* and for the intimate relationship with *self* and with *God*.

Wanting the best experiences and the strongest growth for us, God forgives us and He invites us to do the same. This is the essence of the gospel! Without this approach, even if our thoughts and language are pious, God's kingdom is not yet filling our hearts.

We often forgive but not more. Joseph goes beyond that without having to sacrifice the truth.

He is cordial, reconciling and generous: “As far as I am concerned, God turned into good what you meant for evil” (Genesis 50:20).

Joseph provides for their needs: “I myself will take care of you and your families” (Genesis 50:21).

He reassures them and invites them to change their emotional mind set: ““Come over here, . . . don't be angry with yourselves” (Genesis 45:4, 5).

He redefines his brothers' action by looking at the bigger picture, not only to clear and rehabilitate them—“it was God who sent me here, not you” (Genesis 45:8)—but to raise their discussion to a spiritual and prophetic level.

How can one understand what happens in the light of God? Three times, he said, “God sent me” (see Genesis 45:5, 7, 8). Then perhaps out of modesty and to change their mindset he

implies that a new leaf is turned over: “Hurry, return to my father” (Genesis 45:9).

Thus, one can complete the profile of relational and social maturity: going toward others, endeavoring to get along with them, building lasting and fruitful relationships, knowing how to be both discrete and cordial, being able to adapt easily with flexibility, and knowing how to compromise without guilt.

The ultimate goal of maturity is to serve others in the social, professional or political sphere. Service should be first on a personal and human level in psychological, relational, caring and spiritual domains. We do this by listening to the other, without judging, showing empathy when he or she is in disarray or suffering. We also need to be able to offer comfort, to speak frankly and to speak to the other’s heart (see Genesis 50:21).

At the beginning of this journey, we saw the example of the violent meeting with the other. Here is God’s answer: meeting the other in recovered love.

Reflect:

- When I refuse to forgive, I become a “prisoner” to the person who has hurt me. My wound does not heal, my growth stops and as I nurture my pain I cannot open my heart to the person who has hurt me. Am I conscious that by refusing to forgive I remain a prisoner and maintain a prejudicial link with the offender?

Interlude

From the son of Jacob to the Son of Israel

**The creation of humanity,
The metaphors of the garden and the tree,
And the biography of Joseph have all spoken about
Man's growth, about his path to maturity,
And his self-management.
The word of God is so rich that many other illustrations
Or biblical biographies could, no doubt,
Enrich this thought.**

**Heavenly things or divine intentions
By themselves too elevated
Or too difficult to understand
Are thus made available to us through images.
But they are not the ultimate teaching,
The ideal model, the "reality."**

**The reality of all these things is in Christ.
The parable is a finger that
Points to a star in heaven at night.**

**Christ is not the parable nor the finger,
He is the morning star, the truth and
The fullness indicated in the metaphor.**

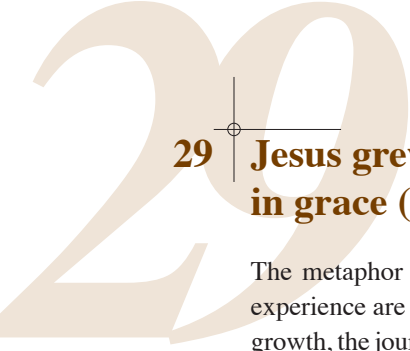
**When a story testifies to a walk of faith,
A right attitude toward life,
It reflects Christ and prefigures Him.**

**When this story reveals a failure,
It still testifies of Christ as the only One
Capable of being the ideal example.**

**Having reached the heart of our reflection on
Self-management, it appears
Therefore indispensable
to go a step further.
From Joseph, son of Jacob,
We will move on to Jesus, son of Israel,**

From the school of a prime minister to that of a king.

**Who else can guide us better
Other than the incarnate Word,
Man by excellence, Jesus of Nazareth,
To the summit of self-management?**



29 | Jesus grew in wisdom and stature—and in grace (Luke 2:52)

The metaphor of the tree and the detailed aspects of Joseph's experience are illustrations of the divine plan for human beings: growth, the journey to maturity, and self-management or personal stewardship. This plan can sometimes be difficult to understand but the Creator speaks to us through pictures and parables that are like a finger pointing to the stars at night.

The truth—the real picture—is Jesus Christ. He is not a parable, nor a pointing finger. He is the morning star, the truth and fullness to which the metaphor refers. When someone testifies of a work of faith or of the right attitude when facing temptation, he or she points to Christ. When the narrator reveals any inadequacy, he or she points to Christ as the only perfect example.

Jesus goes further and higher than anyone before or after Him, and gives us a more perfect model (see Ephesians 4:13). Jesus grew in the quality and depth of His relationship with God—in grace—and in the building up of His personality—in wisdom—as well as physically—in stature. His growth becomes a motivation and model for us.

Jesus is the source of our self-management. As our Creator, He knows our secrets for growth. He is our strength and life. As our liberator and Savior, He is our life's possibility and its means. He is love and wants to become the educator of our peace.

Jesus' ministry for us is both within and without. Without: it serves as a model, a referent, a law, with the joy of being constantly renewed with enthusiasm, but also with the risk of discouragement in realizing the gap between His life and ours. Within: by His ministry of reconciliation, forgiveness, inspiration, direction, edification, and communicating His strength. He is the energy of faith, love and hope. He is finally the justification of our self-management. Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the origin and goal of our life.

The greatest need of self-management goes beyond a strict personal plan. Our education being one with redemption, we

will grow in grace and stewardship of who we are, making the plan of salvation true and effective in our lives and in our community. If we understand that self-management is the core of our redemption, we will make it the focus of attentive study and application, both individually and communally.

There was a time when much was said about “God’s honor.” Job in his time was the honor of God! Jesus Christ honored God completely, in all areas of his ministry, including that of growth (see Luke 2:52). This aspect is important for us.

Paul said we are united and identified with Christ in growth (see Romans 6:5). In turn, He admonished His church to defend His honor, to pursue this task of plenitude (see John 1:16; Ephesians 1:23; 3:19; Hebrews 10:22)—not through domination and power over others but through love, humility and fruitfulness of the believer. Self-management is therefore our selfless service for others and for God. It is worth the effort in the light of Christ to learn these methods and progressive stages.

Reflect:

- What does it mean, “to live by the Spirit?” By whom or what did I live before living by the Spirit? Another spirit, other spirits, something else?
- What difference is there between the “Spirit” and the spirits? For example, in the process of growth, the child lives by the “childish spirit,” then by his mother’s, his father’s, his family’s, his social groups’, then perhaps one day by the spirit of his own choice.

30 Putting childish ways behind me (1 Corinthians 13:11)

Becoming an adult is not limited to the physiological process. That is what the apostle Paul said in his love hymn (see 1 Corinthians 13). A true adult is capable of thinking, loving, deciding, and integrating other facts than those in the present situation. For example, the reality of God's kingdom enables us to grasp that the present may not be determined only by our past, expertise, shortcomings, successes or mistakes. It can be enlightened and renewed by other possibilities.

A liberation, a call, a new and broader vision of life, a solution, a new project or an escape from death can meaningfully modify the way we think. One of the roles of love, faith and hope is to inject in us a different and transforming element. Am I a sinner? This is true and it is difficult: "But as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful kindness became more abundant" (Romans 5:20). By grace, this difficulty becomes a resource.

One of the characteristics of a child is his or her inability to focus on more than one thing at a time: beginning with his or her own perception or grief, present annoyance or the toy he or she wants. But slowly the process of maturation grows to completion.

For example, children do not have an innate sense of volume conservation. If one pours the same quantity of liquid in a narrow and high container or a flat and wide container, a child will believe there is more liquid in the first container because it is higher! Then one day the concept of volume and its conservation becomes obvious. He or she has now acquired the ability to simultaneously consider the object's verticality and horizontality. With time, the child will acquire a more balanced, less selective, and more open vision of his or her environment, and broaden the scope of their thoughts and actions.

For human maturity, this deep process of inner reorganization must continue throughout life. It is especially fundamental for all facets of interpersonal communication. To know how to transfer the focus from self to the other to listen to them with

consideration and respect, while remaining present, is truly the face-to-face contact the other needs.

Curiosity, flexibility, a youthful spirit, enthusiasm and wonder are indispensable to the human soul in its intellectual, emotional, moral, relational and religious aspects. Such growth begins with the radical change represented by baptism (see Romans 6:5) and continues through our lives by faith. When we focus on Christ, our lives becoming a single plant growing with Him.

Reflect:

- How can one be “harmless as a dove and wise as a serpent,” firm on clear principles and yet open to the Other as a way of life?
- How does one reconcile the child’s wonder and trusting enthusiasm with the adult’s mature confidence?

31 Mature adulthood (Ephesians 4:13)

In Christ, the concept of growth takes all its meaning, expansion and profoundness. This is what the apostles understood (see Ephesians 4:12–15; 2 Peter 1:3–11). On one hand, we feel obligated toward humility, simplicity and non-pretense, knowing it is only through genuine piety and prayer that we can acquire these virtues. On the other hand, we are invited to go forward without complacency toward the experience of growth.

What is the goal? The stature of the fullness of Christ! (see Ephesians 4:13). Is this a pretentious dream? In order to avoid the dilemma between “I” being humiliated or being exalted, it is necessary to establish who we are in God, our true place and the right dynamics of our growth.

The concept of an “ideal” perfection is misleading and immature. To believe that God calls us to sublime perfection and blameless accomplishment would be to deceive ourselves and deny Christ’s ministry for our justification. God invites us toward maturity with the comprehension that this kind of maturity is not a stereotypical mold and identical for all. It is something less “perfect,” yet livelier and more dynamic (see Ecclesiastes 9:4). It is wiser to speak of this process as a constant maturation, being careful at every stage to remain adaptable, lively and authentic to ourselves and to God.

We previously considered that this maturation and deep inner change allowed a child to emerge by successive stages from egocentrism and acquire, day by day, a more accurate vision of the reality of the world and its laws. What a vast domain for research, without risk of boredom and with the possibility of renewed wonder.

There are different spheres operating within and around us. The laws governing every human being in physiological, psychological, intellectual, social, moral and spiritual aspects are numerous and complex. Like Ezekiel’s wheels, these laws interact and turn within one another: parent–child relationships, relationships of a couple, and relationships within groups of different types and sizes, from teenage sets to political, religious

and ethnic constellations.

To insist on these various laws is not being legalist for they are the basis for the functioning of the universe. It is appropriate to consider them not from their restraining or coercive aspects but as principles of life that assist function, maintenance, development and growth. In the light of Christ, these laws relate directly to Christian self-management.

Reflect:

- What could be signs of transgressing the structure of laws on which our world functions?
- Without becoming egocentric or narcissistic, would I be able to identify the areas of my interior life in which I excel? Am I assured that God delights to see me progress in these areas?

32 | The Word became flesh (John 1:14)

Jesus agreed not only to leave heaven but, most importantly, to assume the human condition of relationship and growth in a sinful world. Throughout His ministry, He could not have experienced growth without constantly deepening His encounter with God, Himself and others. In doing this, He experienced both sweet and difficult times.

One of the laws previously identified but even more obvious and necessary in Christ's experience is the unavoidable power of one's relationship with the Other. There is no maturing without assimilation, not an intellectual or theoretical one but an existential assimilation of reality. Everything I learn about life and myself inevitably comes through the Other, which reveals to us whether we are an infant or an adult, stupid or intelligent, selfish or generous, and more.

Christ discovered joy in these encounters: the pleasure of friendship in a welcoming home, His love for the disciples and desire for their presence and support, happiness to see them open up to the kingdom, wonder and admiration for the faith of some, but above all, peace and fullness in His communion with God. These were motives and nourishment that fostered Christ's growth. In the same way, we are invited to grow to the fullness of Christ while assuming communication with His desires, joys, feelings, and projects.

In these encounters, Christ also discovered concern and suffering. He confronted poverty, illness, death, sin, injustice, lack of faith and vision, spitefulness, jealousy, violence, and hatred. The risks of temptation and of contamination can also be opportunities for more dedication, generosity, altruism and purity without compromise. These are the raw materials of growth.

Unlike Christ, the believer is not expected to save the world. He or she is called to follow the Master, to bear witness to salvation and to share it. Difficulties cannot be avoided; they are a factual necessity, the common fate of all humanity. To transform this reality into opportunities is to learn about spiritual destitution, necessary resources in God, culture, patience, transformation of

temptation into test through faith, and support for unfortunate associates.

It is an exalting labor. Often painful, occasionally repulsive, sometimes heroic, this step must not be sought with an unhealthy and masochistic taste. It is a blessing to approach it with faith and with the assurance of God's presence. This allows grace to increase all the more.

Reflect:

- Can a temporary isolation serve another purpose other than just cutting us off from people? If yes, what are the conditions?
- Our heart is either open or closed. Can it be completely open to God and at the same time closed to people or things that I fear? When do I consciously become aware of what I either accept or reject? How does an unhealed wound become evident?
- There are some facets of my spouse or children's characters that I do not accept. Rather than express irritation about this, can I see it as an opportunity for growth and for drawing closer?

33 | I came to fulfill (Matthew 5:17)

On the verge of becoming an adult, a child must learn about reality and its laws. These laws are God's revelation and the way toward religious maturity. The 10 "words" at Sinai and the Sermon on the Mount are two examples of this.

When Christ repeats, "You have heard that the law of Moses says . . . But I say . . ." (Matthew 5:21, 22), one can measure the authority and majesty with which He comments on the law in giving them the extraordinary dimension of His personality. It is no longer a law imposed from without like at Sinai, but a law that will grow through the Spirit of Christ within the heart. It becomes part of self: "I myself no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). This is what it truly means to be "autonomous"—having the law (*nomos*) in oneself (*autos*). While the word can be used in an arrogant and illusory sense of independence, it assumes an evangelical humility and strength in Christ.

To speak of autonomy is to testify to the dynamics of life. Christ spoke the words—"But I tell you"—with authority, yet without pride or shyness. Christ fulfilled the law and actualized it, in Him and around Him. It is the same for the Christian called to faith and obedience. This movement previously began among the pagans (see Romans 2:14), who followed their conscience as a law for oneself. Having a conscience regenerated and enlightened by the gospel, the Christian should also actualize the law for him- or herself and for others, not in the sense of laxness—this would be contrary to the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount—but in the sense of a more reasonable, incarnate and demanding spiritualization (see Romans 12:1).

But autonomy has limits. The dynamics of the law must not lead one to forget its role as a compass and a beacon. Christ the truth and the life is also the path (see John 14:6). Therefore autonomy also means to find the way to learn and tell others about the good and bad itineraries.

Another aspect of this multi-faceted maturity implies that in relation to oneself and others, one will have the courage and

ability to set limits, references and landmarks—if need be, to also denounce trends, weaknesses and carelessness of the present time.

It is not prohibited to forbid. We must be willing and able to spell out the law without extremism, hardness of heart or complacency. On the pretext of not frustrating a child, one might raise an immature being without landmarks or capacity for voluntary inhibition, without freedom of choice and strength of decision, eventually without projects and no other pleasures than dependencies or passive distractions. The child's maturity—like their autonomy—depends on our maturity.

Reflect:

- Without arrogance, guile or servility, can I serenely assume points of view that seem right and clearly defend them against opposition?

34 | I will tell of all Your wonders (Psalm 9:1)

The themes of astonishment, wonder, and admiration are not at first sight major theological teachings. Yet the frequency of these words in the Bible should catch our attention. God or Christ, and humanity, are at the same time subjects and objects of admiration. God's wonders, His projects, His creation—of which human beings are His “marvelous creatures”—and Christ are objects of praise.

In Luke 7:9, Jesus expresses His admiration for the centurion and when He says “your faith is great” in Matthew 15:28 to the Canaanite woman, He translates this same feeling. God Himself seems to express something similar about His work of creation (see Genesis 1:31; Job 1:8).

The ability to appreciate a person or a thing, the courage to express a happy surprise, the faculty to express one's deep feelings, the audacity to venture an enthusiastic undertaking, the capacity for astonishment are characteristics of loving and free beings—free to be themselves as children of God. This is a feature of maturity.

We are deeply influenced by slogans wrongly attributed to Christianity according to which the “I” is hateful, that we are useless wretched creatures, that we must not appreciate ourselves. These ideas are not completely false. However, their usefulness is insignificant and their efficiency uncertain if one judges by the fruits they have produced in Christianity. Their noxiousness is obvious: they demolish and make us shrivel.

If you had created the masterpiece of your life would you be pleased if someone said it was worthless? Yet we believe by a sort of mental aberration that we please God by telling Him that His creation's masterpiece, this wonderful creature, is dreadfully worthless!

We are sinners, weak, limited and incapable of saving ourselves. Yet we are also and above all children of the King of kings, having so much value that Christ in His love would have come

and died for any single one of us. Under God's guidance and in the setting of His laws, we are called to live the fullness of our life, to dare to really live, to fulfill ourselves, to appreciate and like ourselves. We are called not to cultivate frustration and mediocrity, but to allow life to penetrate us, to allow the breath of love and the divine to go through us, to develop all the potentialities of our growth in Christ.

If we lived fully, it might make a difference to the alarming percentage of young people who do not commit their life to God or who leave the church after having committed their life. The ability to marvel daily, to legitimately benefit from life, the Sabbath and relationships, faith, art and nature is one of the dimensions of maturity. We are called to live, not just to function.

Reflect:

- Why not practice an exercise of contemplation? Choose a chance meeting, situation, experience, person, or even an object to become an object of deep wonder and praise.

35 | It is for your good that I am going away (John 16:7)

Wonder does not last forever, and our existence consists of a succession of joys and sorrows, contentment and frustrations. Christ cannot and does not want to spare the believer time to experience solitude. He even suggests it is for our own good. The spiritual explanation Jesus gives is that His departure will allow the coming of the Holy Spirit.

At the level of our actual experience, however, questions arise. Thorough study enables us to better understand God's plan for us. Christ Himself experienced this separation (see Philippians 2:7) from a necessity bound to incarnation and also as a model for us. Christ's "absence" does not make us orphans (see John 14:18), only lonely.

However, this is also a new and fertile opportunity for growth, which implies the experience of dispossession and of the indispensable confrontation of frustration. Forced to react, we take control of ourselves: "Go with the strength you have" (Judges 6:14). This discovery of finitude obliges us and incites us to grow, to become adults, to be ourselves, to take charge of our life, on our own. As Jesus said to Thomas, "Blessed are those who haven't seen me and believe anyway" (John 20:29).

At a certain age a child is weaned. Later, the young adult will leave his or her parents. Do we leave God in the same kind of way? No—and yes! No, in the sense that for the believer God is always the great presence in his or her life. As a creature, he or she is always spiritually dependent on the Creator. But, yes, because it is about leaving behind a certain idea, certain types of relationships with Him that are too childish, too passive and psychologically too dependent.

In Acts 1:11, the apostles were invited to stop gazing up at the sky. After the indispensable phase of contemplation, they must now move to the equally necessary phase of action. The contemplative person must first be lost in order to be found again in a different way. The absent Christ becomes present in us through the Holy Spirit, with values and strengths that are no

longer external but integrated. Then Christ becomes our internal reference, our internalized, personalized and actualized law (see John 14:16, 17).

The believer does not need to live a frustrated life. He or she does not have to nurture frustration as if it was a deserving work. If they submit to it, not only will they not be happy but they will not grow. However, if they overcome it by assuming the various aspects of life, daring to be themselves, looking upward in service, action and love, they will grow and be enriched with an inner plenitude.

Frustration by itself is devastating. Love by itself can be a weakness. The association of want, limitation and love enables the construction of authentic maturity.

Reflect:

- The weightlifter is aware of his weaknesses and also of his capabilities. His whole attention concentrates on what he is doing. How am I undertaking my spiritual journey and how does it translate to my daily life?
- What is my threshold of tolerance of separation from my spouse, my children or a prayer meeting where only three persons are present?
- Am I in distress because of the people missing from my life? Am I tempted to find replacements? Do I dare to face the void in its full impact? Can I transcend separations, as the disciples of Emmaus were able to?

36 | But I tell you (Matthew 5:22)

Jesus demonstrates in the Sermon on the Mount that the law cannot remain an external frozen code requiring a blameless legalistic obedience. With Christ, the law is supernaturally written in human hearts through the inner dynamics of the spiritual life, giving it a vast scope and demand.

The precepts of the gospels are not fundamentally different from those of the Old Testament. These principles announced by the prophets are realized in Christ and are grafted in the heart. To internalize and spiritualize the law is the opposite of weakness. From this standpoint, Jesus continues and completes the revelation of the Old Testament.

Jesus refers to the tripartite structure of the Old Testament when He explains quotations about Himself from the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms (see Luke 24:44). In the Pentateuch, the law is revealed and externally imposed by a majestic manifestation. The second part of the same law is made known by inspiration to the prophet's heart. Depending on the circumstances, it is further interiorized and actualized by the prophet. In the third section, the interiorization is complete in the celebrations of the Psalms and the everyday wisdom of Proverbs.

People speak on behalf of God according to modes that are less frequently supernatural, as in the case of a prophet during a vision. When the Holy Spirit moves people, He often begins with the experience of suffering or injustice (for example, Job and numerous Psalms), danger, joy, contemplation of nature, desire to praise, a teaching (Proverbs), or the experiences of life (Ecclesiastes) or of love (Songs of Solomon).

The first two movements of the Bible are descending, from God toward human beings, either externally (the law) or internally (prophetic inspiration). In the third movement, God inspires people from their human reality and allows them to lift up their heart or that of their readers toward the Creator. One can only be overwhelmed by the loving condescension of God initiating this movement of dialogue and consultation.

Evidently, Christ establishes and accomplishes this dual movement of descending and ascending between God and humanity (see Hebrews 1:2). It is no longer about an external educator but an inner being, Jesus (see Galatians 2:20; 3:24). This is why He can say, “But I tell you . . .” and in His Spirit teach people in faithfulness by His word, by a law of liberty (see James 1:25) and by spiritual autonomy (see 1 Corinthians 2:15) to do the same.

Mature believers in the fullness of Christ must therefore be able to say like Him, “But I tell you . . .” Being an adult is to have the courage to speak God’s will. One must transmit the positive laws of biological, spiritual and social life, and also their indispensable interdictions. Being an adult is to develop the ability and courage to internalize the law and to live it. It is also being able to share it with others—children and younger people, in particular—and to do this without pretension or shyness (see 2 Timothy 1:8), without faintheartedness, without anguish for causing a momentary yet salutary sadness (see 2 Corinthians 7:10). Being an adult is the ability to say what is good or bad without false modesty but also with respect for every culture.

Reflect:

- A child’s growth requires that they encounter space with boundaries that widen over time. A place of gestation will occur in succession: uterus, parents, family, school. How can I turn a moment, a circumstance where I feel cramped into a “place of nurture” for a new stage of my life?
- What is my position concerning the law? For example, while driving on the road, do I show respect for the code through fear of its possible sanction or because I thoroughly understand its necessity?

37 | More than 12 legions of angels (Matthew 26:53)

The entire ministry of Jesus, from His retreat in the desert to the Cross, was marked by temptations. One of these was to resort to force.

At Gethsemane, Peter faced the same temptation and yielded in a pathetic manner by brandishing a sword. Jesus had access to an infinitely larger force—12 legions of angels—yet refused it because it did not fit with the purpose of His mission: to overcome by the overwhelming weakness of love. The temptation of omnipotence is nevertheless real.

As we have seen, the young child perceives reality in their own way. His or her physical powerlessness is accompanied by omnipotence in the mind. Through the power of imagination in a game, for example, he can incarnate many different roles: father, mother, baby, doctor, fireman, superman or wherever his or her mind takes them. They do not differentiate well between dream and reality. In growing up and acquiring personal, familial and sexual identities, realism will mature. His or her ability to dream will express itself in such areas as creativity, art, literary, technical expression, exploration of the scientific, and technical, sporting, gaming and computing fields.

It is not our intention here to tackle the dangers—physical or psychological—of certain practices, such as the flight to an artificial paradise. Dreaming can be the best or the worst thing. In the wrong circumstances, a dream can quickly turn into a nightmare. The adult phantasm of omnipotence is part of it: refusal to let go, feelings of having a right to everything, convictions of being the savior of humanity, administrators of justice (see Mark 9:34), desires for possession of the other, frenzied quests for honors, money, possessions (see Mark 8:36), diplomas, supernatural power (see Acts 8:19), success, denial of death, and more.

A child should learn the existence of boundaries early in life. When one oversteps boundaries, there are no more limits. The child needs to experience refusal, prohibition, finitude, and the

formative “no” of love, not the illegitimate “no” of injustice, hatred and mourning omnipotence. In later life, it will then be far less difficult and less prejudicial to continue adult self-management, listening to the voice of Christ sometimes saying to him or her, “You don’t know what you are asking!” (Mark 10:38).

Being an adult is to hear the “no” of life and to integrate it, avoiding illusions, accepting aging and dying while establishing a good distance between things and beings, and becoming a relational person while giving sense to one’s life.

Reflect:

- How can I understand that before opening myself to the Holy Spirit who is ready to give me a sense of presence and consistency, I feel weak, deprived, and vacillating?
- Have you had the experience of accepting and assuming these uncomfortable moments? What was the outcome?
- Jesus is described as being kind and meek by the gospel writers, how can I be like Him and give away my space and my right, without doing so by weakness or false humility?

38 Thy will be done (Matthew 6:10)

A concern often mentioned by Jesus was the will of God. It was a key element in the “Lord’s Prayer” and came to the forefront at crucial moments in His life (see Matthew 26:42). To do the will of God was “His food” (see John 4:34).

For Jesus, God’s will was two-dimensional:

The first had to do with His personal life and exceptional ministry for the salvation of humanity (see 1 Corinthians 1:30). God’s peculiar plan for the life of Christ deserves our study and our meditation.

The second aspect of the “will of God” is conformity with the character, action, and laws of God. This aspect of God’s will is not limited to Christ, it is also fully valid for us.

God’s will is the opposite of selfishness and its desires (see 1 John 2:16, 17). It is continual thankfulness (see 1 Thessalonians 5:18), doing good (see 1 Peter 2:15), transformation of mind (see Romans 12:2), and bearing the fruits of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22). It is the presence of the Holy Spirit in us with His gifts (see 1 Corinthians 12) and freedom (see 2 Corinthians 3:17).

There are many exhortations to discern and search for that give opportunity to practice God’s will in making wise plans for life, for close communion with Him, in ethical attitudes, in service to others, and in the growth of individuals and communities.

In exceptional circumstances or particular ministries, God may choose to lead us toward a path or solutions that from His point of view—after all, He is omniscient—is better for us (see, for example, Acts 16:9). Every Christian can testify to this. Yet let us not overvalue these experiences. The testimonies of God’s presence and help in our lives do not mean that the smallest details of our existence have already been written down, as the doctrine of predestination might suggest.

God’s plan for our lives is not a big treasure hunt, already marked out for us to find. Our spiritual quest cannot be reduced to guessing some preset outcome in every event and decision of our existence, merely discovering rather than inventing. This

belief would negate the true will of God since it denies our freedom.

Thinking of this sort causes many believers—even church committees—to “play dice” with God by asking Him for signs to know His plans. Such an attitude can impede our growth and spiritual maturity by annulling our responsibility or reducing it to drawing lots.

God’s will for us is that our discernment and spirituality will grow. God proposes ways of reflection and wisdom; He gave us sensibilities and intelligence. It is up to us to use them! God’s will in general is not about external circumstances; it is about goals, methods, principles, and loyalties to work toward. It is up to us to take responsibility to exercise our freedom, our faithfulness and build up our life. This is the price for maturity.

Reflect:

- What is true or false egoism? Is wanting something for myself being selfish in all cases? If not, what is the difference?
- God’s will is a path that has to be built with human parameters. What are the consequences of this understanding of God’s will for others in our lives?

39 | Light and darkness (John 1:9)

Christ the light of God illuminates men and women—and reveals many dark zones. Physically speaking, when light meets an obstacle it creates shade and it is difficult to argue that in God’s ideal creation there would be light without darkness. Despite the reference to an absence of darkness in the New Jerusalem (see Revelation 22:5), light and darkness are intertwined in the present world.

And it is also true in our lives. Every person has an element of darkness that should be differentiated from personal sin. This darkness causes us see the same defect in ourselves as a splinter and, in our neighbor, as a beam. Yet this darkness before Christ makes our conscience turn away (see John 8:9) or turn around—God willing—in conversion, when we discover in us the very sin that incited us to criticize the other.

It is good to remove the splinter but we acknowledge that this blindness will follow us “like our shadow” to the end of our days. It is better to tame it now and make the best of it. The most dangerous attitudes toward darkness would be either to deny it or to want to eradicate it. The first, causing diffused guilt, will play tricks on us to the point of despair. The second, illusory and advised against by Christ (see Matthew 13:29), will dehumanize us, depriving us of riches and dynamisms useful to our growth.

Our darkness is a constant call to humility and the perpetual miracle of God’s power being fulfilled in human weakness (see 2 Corinthians 12:7–9). Like shadow theater, it reveals problematic questions that can be useful to one’s knowledge of self and one’s growth. Recognizing a weakness, shame, fear, violent emotion or scheming tendency, we can progress, free ourselves or exploit inhibited resources and unknown sensitivities to find an unsuspected creativeness. As Christ has shown (see Luke 6:41), these hidden things are the source of the different vision we have of ourselves and others. Their actualization is often the key to many conflicts in interpersonal, domestic or professional relationships.

These elements of darkness are generally linked to the encounter

of personality traits and events. Therefore a two-fold struggle follows:

First, not to react negatively to similar circumstances. For example, a woman who was sexually molested in childhood will have to overcome understandable blockages to find true and blooming love. This is what resilience is about.

Second, to transform a failure into victory, a defect into talent. For instance, a young victim of polio, forced to spend long hours in a wheelchair, develops a sensitivity and acuteness of observation enabling him to become a prominent therapist.

A dark zone in a painting, for example, can bring out the brightness of a simple candle with more vigor. The frequent “illumination” of less known areas of our personality can reveal to us an important aspect of God’s will for our lives.

Reflect:

- We read in the Bible descriptions of progressing from unaccomplished to finished, from darkness to light. If I refuse the idea of unfinished or darkness, how can I start my growth journey?
- Am I conscious that what I reject in the other is, at least in germ form, also present in me? Am I able to recognize this without fear or uneasiness in order to make progress?

40 **My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow (Matthew 26:38)**

At times, the Bible mentions people who have experienced a loss of dynamism and energy. This was the case for Cain (see Genesis 4:13), Hagar (see Genesis 21:16), Esau (see Genesis 25:32), Job (see Job 3:1), Elijah (see 1 Kings 19:4), Jonah (see Jonah 4:8) and many others. At first glance, these stories are disquieting but also moving and reassuring as we reflect on them further.

Christ lived similar moments of radical sadness. In modern terms, we might call it an episode of depression. Growth is not an ideally progressive climb. Often it is a serrated way with enthusiastic ascents followed by low points, struggles, discouragements, wayward opportunities, temporary debility and even depressions. For others and ourselves, it is important to learn to manage these different episodes with maturity.

Depression is neither a sin nor a lack of faith. This moment of life and of struggle should not generate more shame or guilt than bronchitis or a sprain. Jesus' example is sufficient to show this.

There should not be judgment nor condemnation —nor self-condemnation—by comments such as “It is not good to think or say things like that,” “You are crazy” or “Repent because you have committed a sin.” This was the intolerable and counter-productive language of Job's friends (see Job 5:17; 15:4; 20:29; 22:5): “One should be kind to a fainting friend, but you have accused me without the slightest fear of the Almighty” (Job 6:14).

The second attitude to avoid is to giving exhortations, solutions and advice. These comments might be right in themselves yet inefficient and revolting for someone depressed. Too often, depressed Christians hear comments like “This is not as catastrophic as you are saying!” “Take hold of yourself!” or “All you have to do is pray.” This is precisely what the person has difficulty doing and such comments increase the feeling of inability, guilt and despair: “What miserable comforters you are!” (Job 16:2).

So what should we do? Accompany the other, be close to him or her, with respect, understanding what he or she lives, in acceptance of who he or she is, keep silent and listen (see Job 13:13; 31:35). To either help or be helped, one needs Christ's maturity when going through this test, to recognize the need for help and dare to request it: "He told them, . . . 'Stay here and watch with me.'" (Matthew 26:38).

After an acute phase of depression, the person slowly recovers his or her strength and a positive disposition. If it is not the case—if depression settles in—the person and those around should know that he or she needs to call in a professional to set up adequate therapy.

Faith and prayer are important—but not as substitute for treatment, that is presumptuous—to accept it and be involved in a more positive way. At a later stage, one should take time to ponder the cause and meaning of the crisis. Perhaps there are life and spiritual lessons to be drawn and, if need be, changes to lifestyle and mental functioning to be implemented.

Reflect:

- Is sadness always depression? Jesus teaches us to go through moments of sadness as times of gestation or of maturing. Have you had that experience?
- Can I think while in a depressive mood, or I should seek help? Should I consider it humiliation, treason or a lack of faith, to seek professional psychological help?
- Do I think about all those I know who are going through a depressive episode? How can I get close to them without being judgmental?

41 | Maneuvers of the devil (Ephesians 6:11)

We have often made mention of the reality of confronting evil. Jesus overcame the ruses of the devil (see Matthew 4:11) and His disciples also had to face this adversary.

Paul speaks about this honestly in the epistle to the Ephesians. It is worthwhile recalling his train of thought. After establishing the foundation of salvation by grace (Ephesians 2), he shows the strength of love (Ephesians 3) and unity in Christ (Ephesians 4). In this passage, he speaks of the growth model of maturity: human beings made in the perfect stature of Christ (see Ephesians 4:13).

Paul then draws attention to imitating Christ and the walk of love (see Ephesians 5:1, 2) for our personal, moral, conjugal, familial and professional life. Our growth would not be complete if we were to remain immature in our understanding of our struggle against evil, so the apostle gave this beautiful parable of the battle and victory of the Christian (see Ephesians 6:10-18).

With all his descriptive powers, Paul expresses the struggle against these mysterious forces that are “principalities, powers of darkness, spiritual wickedness.” Many Christians think and tremble, imagining horrible things, repeating stories of demonic intrusion in the life of a believer against his or her will, as if the devil still has power over us while we are in Christ! As if we were not reborn with Christ (see Ephesians 2:6)!

What does Paul speak about regarding the struggle against the maneuvers of the devil? Does he speak of exorcisms and impressive rituals? Absolutely not! It was perhaps the proper time to speak about this subject, so his silence is meaningful. Instead, he speaks of things “natural” to the Christian—simple, yet powerful: truth, justice, zeal, peace, faith, assurance of salvation, and God’s word. This rebuffs the sensational. What maturity in the exercise of faith and piety! Let us not lend power to the devil he does not have.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul does not speak of people who are still “children of wrath” (see Ephesians 2:3), who still have boisterous behaviors. Rather, he talks to adopted children (see

Ephesians 1:5), who have become God's work (see Ephesians 2:10). Can we seriously think God will let anyone destroy His work, as long as we do not voluntarily decide to turn our backs on Him? When we fall, isn't He always there by our side, to encourage, lift up and strengthen us? Do we believe that God, who asks us to forgive 70 times seven, will abandon us at the least failure? What immature and non-biblical ideas of God express such anguish about the devil and evil?

The Christian belongs to the One who reigns, who is "at God's right hand in the heavenly realms. . . far above any ruler or authority or power or leader or anything else in this world or in the world to come" (Ephesians 1:20, 21). This is why on behalf of God and the Lord Jesus grace and peace are given (see Ephesians 1:2). And the peace of God is not a vain word (see Philippians 4:7).

Reflect:

- Is it confrontational to face the adversary or anything opposing God? Or does evil step in from the moment we respond to the adversary's solicitations?
- Can I have a deep spiritual experience of living the peace of Christ when I am faced with adversity from within (confused and suffering) and without (a faithless, lawless, hostile world that I long to escape from, at the Second Coming)?

42 | **The ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18)**

Self-management—stewardship of our lives—is the care of oneself and salvation; it is neither selfish nor self-centered. In itself, a value is also a center of influence toward others. When we have tasted this privilege of growth in Christ, how can we not share it with others! Concern for oneself defeats itself, if it excludes a concern for others.

This is why God invites us to work with Him in this wonderful ministry: “What this means is that those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun! All this newness of life is from God, who brought us back to himself through what Christ did. And God has given us the task of reconciling people to him. . . . We are Christ’s ambassadors” (2 Corinthians 5:17–20).

At this point, self-management assumes significant importance in this project. There was a time when preaching the Word and “present truth” were sufficient. This is not the case anymore for two reasons:

The first reason is the bad example of religion and politics. The Word has lost much of its impact. The religious language does not find an echo in a secularized public. It appears, often rightly so, as without practical effect, denying humanity in shallow promises.

The second reason is that, more than ever, the transmission of a value can be done only in a relation of trust that transmits an authentic and experienced practice. If a Christian truly experiences Christ’s transforming power, reconciliation with God, with himself and with others, finding true efficacy and enthusiasm, one can be assured that he or she will be a good ambassador.

To say that a believer is a new creature refers to what is called justification. In this relationship, a person’s status is instantaneously different. Under the law, he or she is a convicted enemy of God and in rebellion. As a new believer, he or she is a

pardoned child of God and at peace.

This was demonstrated in the case of the repentant thief on the cross. The new creature is so only by a position from God who declares him or her righteous.

From the perspective of sanctification, an everlasting inner transformation is taking place. At times this transformation occurs by rapid development, as a commotion or like the sudden budding of a flower; sometimes in a silent, subtle but active growth of the person and his or her talents and understandings.

This was the case of all the apostles and many disciples. Consider Barnabas, the son of consolation (see Acts 4:36). When we follow him at Antioch (see Acts 11), during the Council of Jerusalem (see Acts 15) or in his ministry close to Paul and Mark, one sees how the development of his talent of exhortation and reconciliation helped, how his attitude in relating and service to others was greatly profitable to the newborn church. Is the end-time church a Barnabas people?

Reflect:

- Reconciliation is the restoration of a just relationship between God and me. This comes from God. Should growth in my life not be a logical consequence?
- Are my thoughts so deeply unified and at peace that I am able to consider the needs of others that might be deep, authentic and involved? Following Jesus' example, do I care to live with and for the other?

43 Be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20)

Christ's love motivates us to be ambassadors. Toward the end of 2 Corinthians 5, the apostle Paul exhorts us: "Be reconciled to God!" (verse 20). But how could workers of reconciliation not allow themselves to be reconciled? Has the apostle not spoken of the assurance of salvation and service (see 2 Corinthians 3:4) and the ministry of this new alliance by the Holy Spirit (see 2 Corinthians 3:6, 17)? Why mention again something that should be a prerequisite?

He is wanting to reinforce his message, but there is more to this repetition. Paul continued, "that we could be made right with God through Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:21). This is the experience in which God is the guarantor and we are the main actors. The reconciliation that qualifies us as ambassadors is more than reconciliation with the Father, it is also a reconciliation with oneself in whom Christ and the Holy Spirit dwell.

Reconciliation with God is then complete with its three facets of love that summarize the law: a "vertical" connection with the right "horizontal" communication, externally with others and internally with ourselves (see Matthew 22:37–40). We need to remember the importance of healthy self-love and of reconciliation with oneself. This psychological work of peace with oneself, of self-integration and of integrity is eminently spiritual. It is vital for our inner dynamics, for our happiness and for our authenticity, as well as for our missionary dynamism.

God forgives us. We forgive others. But do we forgive ourselves? Are we more demanding than God? Are being madly loved by the King of kings and hating oneself compatible?

Self-management is also about reconciling oneself with one's childhood, adolescence, immature maturity, and with one's future. It is to recover from crises, injuries, errors and mistakes. It is to stop devaluing oneself, blaming oneself, going round in circles, repeating non-stop illusory problems or dreams and to free oneself of their tyranny. It is not to wear oneself out in inner struggles against our memories, shortcomings or emotions.

Instead, we positively live our inner experience through prayer, study and meditation on the Word, private and public worship, and communion as a sacred act of peace (see Philippians 3:5–9) and of global reconciliation. It is a powerful way to educate oneself positively. Attention, positive thinking and emotion management can be fully spiritual acts.

Growth is accepting oneself, as a child of God, as an individual of inestimable price. It is cultivating peace while developing health, self-confidence, appraising ourselves as God does and affirming ourselves legitimately. It is weighing ourselves not with the world's scales but with the scale of faith whose counterweight is the free gift of grace—the value God gives us in Christ.

Reflect:

- In reconciliation, each individual finds his or her dimension and place in creating a new “way of life” with others. This is new evidence of the continuity of life as willed by God. How can I be more conscious, happier and prouder of the great delight God has in the person I am? Can I be thankful to Him once more in being truthfully enthusiastic today?

44 The incomparable riches of His grace (Ephesians 2:7)

Mentioned less frequently than His love yet present throughout the Scriptures is God's goodness. This is so in the Old Testament—see, for example, Psalm 31:19; 100:5; 103:1—as well as in the New Testament.

This rich theme is a source of inspiration and transformation (see Romans 2:4; 1 Corinthians 4:13; 13:4; Galatians 5:22; Ephesians 5:9; Colossians 3:12). The apostle Paul speaks of the gentleness and graciousness of Christ (see 2 Corinthians 10:1). Although not explicitly expressed, this emerges in the discourses and actions of Christ.

Tenderness is similarly important. God's tenderness and that of Jesus (see Philippians 1:8) show through His words (see Mark 10:24; Luke 12:4). Both Paul and John invite us to imitate them.

Following the example of Jesus, every human being should take into account the growth and expression of goodness and tenderness. These are not sporting, social, military or political virtues. In order to shine in these areas of confrontation, it is better not to have qualms and to be tough. Nevertheless, goodness and tenderness are human qualities that are needed in the couple, the family, and the church. They will help us “grow” toward the kingdom and make us true sons and daughters of our heavenly Father.

It is no longer possible for a Christian on the verge of eternity to rebel and behave poorly, even though he or she believes they are being either attacked or injured. The believer can endeavor not to “react” instinctively or emotionally by learning to respond with kindness, nobility, wisdom and love (see 1 Thessalonians 5:15), while not excluding firmness with a forgiving spirit (see Matthew 6:12; Ephesians 4:3; Colossians 3:13). He or she should avoid initiating criticism, attack, jealousy, or conflict (see Proverbs 19:22).

We strive unequally to live up to these virtues. It is more difficult

for some than for others, but everything can be learned and developed. It is a talent that God expects us to develop, and active contemplation of our Lord will allow us to be transformed by His Spirit and into His image (see 2 Corinthians 3:18).

A child's education plays a decisive role in this sensitization and opening to tenderness. Psychologists whose interest is in the study of character have observed that out of all the components of our mental "skeleton," tenderness is the most sensitive to educational influence. Parents have a huge responsibility in this area. However, it does not abolish the adult's responsibility toward oneself. After basic training, life doesn't stop. Christian self-management—this permanent self-education—can and must take over. It will always bear fruit.

Reflect:

- In the kingdom of God, justice, goodness, kindness, and tenderness have their place next to firmness, because in a balanced relation they compensate, check and control each other in order to allow the existence of the other. How can I, today, participate in the goodness of God?
- What should one understand by Jesus' rebuke to the rich young ruler who called Him "Good Master" (see Mark 10:18)?

45 | God did not send His Son to judge (John 3:17)

The words *judge* and *judgment* have many different meanings. Although they are distinct words in the original language, the context of their use often determines the meaning. For example, we should not judge, that is to say not to pass judgment on someone (see Matthew 7:1) but the spiritual person judges everything (see 1 Corinthians 2:15). We should examine, interrogate and evaluate everything.

Judgment is sometimes a condemnation (see Romans 8:1; Revelation 18:10), sometimes an examination without prejudging the result, and sometimes an aid to the innocent especially the poor, the widow or the orphan. Sometimes it is a pedagogical and preparatory decision, sometimes it is a final one. This is why we find apparently contradictory affirmations in the Bible, such as “For the Lord is coming to judge the earth” (Psalm 98:9) and “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it” (John 3:17). Consider also the comparison between “You must give an account on judgment day” (Matthew 12:36) and “There is no judgment awaiting those who trust him” (John 3:18). The concept of judgment is of interest to Christian self-management for many reasons.

One cannot really grow under the fear of sanction. Threat can help correct a behavior externally but rarely transforms the heart. Education only blooms in a climate of love, respect, freedom and trust. In light of the gospel, the apprentice manager of self that we are all called to be, must experience not only faith in Christ—this is basic—but also the implications of faith in building relationship links of freedom and of non-condemnation toward God.

Jesus’ statement—“There is no judgment awaiting those who trust him”—is the logical continuation of the gospel summarized in John 3:16. Solomon’s judgment (see 1 Kings 3:16–28) is a wonderful liberation for the child whose life is spared and who finds his true mother, for the mother who sees the truth acknowledged, and even for the second woman who is freed

from where she had entrapped herself. And we are all freed from an unjust image of the judge, of false reports distorted with guilt and alleging guilt before God. “Perfect love expels all fear” (1 John 4:18).

The vision of Zechariah 3:1–6 shows that alleging guilt is the work of the adversary. The Father’s work is forgiveness, purification, rehabilitation and elevation to a higher dignity. Has the Christian forgotten that the gospel is festive? The story of the prodigal son ends with celebration (see Luke 15:22–24). Self-management is a feast!

For this feast to be complete, we should not behave like the elder son. We can understand his reaction, but we must reject it methodically by the work of faith and love. This is also the task of Christian self-management. This work of liberating ourselves from a distorted understanding of the judgment is ongoing and it expresses itself by a similar attitude toward others: not to judge, not to condemn and not to accuse. “Do for others what you would like them to do for you” (Matthew 7:12).

Reflect:

- Am I freed from the law of condemnation? Does the Holy Spirit live in me and is His first duty to really set me free as Paul stated? See 2 Corinthians 3:17: “Wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, he gives freedom.”

46 Let the little children come (Matthew 19:14)

Jesus' statement—"Let the children come to me" (Matthew 19:14)—may seem surprising. Is this an exhortation to laxness?

We ended the previous page with the golden rule (see Matthew 7:12). This principle is the choice guideline for self-management. Naturally we find it hard to live out this reciprocity. We are swift to demand respect for our rights, to make ourselves heard, to claim our privileges. But we are less inclined to think of this for others, to listen to them, to imagine that their rights could be a duty for us. But our duty is to "Let them . . ."

The spheres where the golden rule plays a role are too numerous to mention. But these include initiatives, freedom, right to err, tolerance, understanding, and acknowledging our good intentions even when our acts betray us. It is the question of the speck and the plank, the gnat and the camel.

Take, for example, standings in the church. First, there is "my" status that makes me a member of the church, with all the privileges I believe are attached. But too often the "other" must first behave as a disciple in order for the church—and me—to accept him or her. What if it was the reverse? Because if the church is not in itself the source of salvation, it is a communal life in salvation, by salvation, with rights and duties. Self-management has a necessary collective dimension.

Like Jesus' disciples dealing with the children, we have too much tendency, even with good intentions, to erect barriers and exclude those who want to come to Him. "No" says Jesus, "let them." I must wish for the other what is good and vital for me.

One domain of extreme practical importance to nurturing the golden rule is listening. Goethe wrote: "To speak is a need but to listen is an art." Since satisfying a need is infinitely easier than practicing an art, one can easily notice that of these two activities the first is much more common than the second. Yet in every human being the supplication of Job emerges desperately: "If only I had someone who would listen to me" (Job 31:35).

Self-management in the service of another will necessarily include learning to listen. This is not too difficult but it is not natural for us. We so easily and mistakenly believe we are good listeners, and we rarely submit to the discipline of this training. It is a pity for others and for us because listening brings enrichments and magnificent joys. But it can be learned.

Reflect:

- In church community life, how much room do we give to individuals to “do” and “express” what he or she lives of their relationship with God among others?
- How can I learn to overlook or let something happen that disturbs me?
- With my close family and those whom I specially have charge of—my children—can I allow them the freedom of “let them”?

47 | Seven crucial statements—Part 1

The seven statements made by Christ on the cross are an inexhaustible subject for meditation. We wonder at the Son of Man's beauty, nobility, and greatness. It is also a spiritual itinerary that can express the total development of the individual and is made up of an array of essential influences.

1. "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34).

We can understand that a man bruised and reduced to despair would express violence and a desire for vengeance. This is the case of some difficult statements in certain Psalms. Yet this unfinished stage needs to be surpassed. A more generous and more mature phase of development toward the image of God begins with actions that go beyond forgiveness.

Greatness of the soul expressed through forgiveness is linked to the self-management project. In extreme circumstances, Christ's forgiveness is the perfect application of all His teaching. Christ does not say one thing and do another. The forgiving spirit corresponds to an attitude of inner peace, humility and self-control, even when others sow dissension.

This is what Jesus meant in the parable of the weeds. The refusal of early weeding (see Matthew 13:29, 30)—this virtue of non-exclusion—is respect for the different phases of growth and discovery. It illustrates God's method of action. This does not come on its own, it is a conquest of self. Self-management is the discovery and integration of the characteristics of this kingdom, and it is the beginning of emulating God's characteristics.

This is also illustrated in the parable of the sower. The seeds that fell on good soil did not all produce at the same rate. One gave 30 grains, another 60, another 100 (see Matthew 13:8), but they were all stored with the same joy and without disagreeable comparison between the stalks. This is proof that growth is an individual affair and no-one is to measure or judge another's growth.

2. "You shall be with me" (Luke 23: 43).

Would we be able to hold back reproaches, moral lessons and

prejudices if a condemned criminal spoke to us? More positively, would we be able to share our hopes, our most cherished dreams and everything that brings together and unites?

Christ did this by demonstrating trust and a hope in the future against prejudice and past mistakes. If heaven is in the future (see John 14:3), was it not also a present reality for the converted criminal? When a heavenly reality enters into an earthly life, it is truly lived at that very instant, and not merely hope for some time in the future.

It is difficult to grasp them as present realities but these promises cannot be solely eschatological or they are at the risk of not being real. Visions of the heavenly Jerusalem are beautiful and encouraging, yet when a child of God is praying and a church is at worship, one can say that the kingdom of God has already come.

Reflect:

- It is not only about learning the virtue of patience; it is also about discovering the nature of things and the essence of God through the exercise of patience and moderation. How can we practice patience in our daily lives?
- What differences do God's promises about the future make to your life today?

48 Seven crucial statements—Part 2

3. “Woman, he is your son” (John 19:26).

Erik Erikson, the great developmental psychologist, uses the term “generativity” to describe the ability to take care of others, an individual or a community and especially those we leave behind. A person who is egoistical and only worried about themselves says, “I don’t care what happens after I’m gone.” He or she is not being “generative.”

Being generative is to induce a spiritual “genealogy” and to be interested in others. It is passing on to them in familial, ecclesiastical and social spheres the treasure and the light received as experience, testimony, creativity, intelligence, culture, faith, and love.

Christ demonstrates that it is not necessary to have biological children in order to cultivate this fundamental dimension of maturity. In dealing with others—His disciples, His friends, women, strangers or outcasts—He developed and showed that His relationships were perfect. This availability with social and salvific purposes should inspire every believer in self-management. This is, after all, what is to be qualified as “Christian.”

This relational dimension is not only a gift of goodness and kindness but also a demand. Love is one of these demands. One who wants the best of him- or herself for the other person might appear too harsh. (Maybe this explains the surprising behavior of Jesus toward the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:23–26).

The tithing principle recognizes the transcendence of God as one surpasses oneself to dedicate a part of one’s earnings to the service of God and thus eventually to others.

The two further plant metaphors are helpful in understanding this—pruning and grafting. To prune and to graft are two different operations aiming at one and the same goal: to bear more fruit (see John 15:2; Romans 11:17–24), to allow the vigor of the sap to better invigorate others, the vine branch or the graft, and the fruit. Would not the believer who desires to grow in the stature

of Christ make these realities the object of his or her meditation and commitment?

4. “Why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

When at a young age one has learned by rote and integrated a text into one’s mind, we only need to invoke the beginning of the text for all of it to come to mind immediately. Nurtured with Scriptures, it is certain that Christ knew Psalm 22 by heart. The poignant call at the beginning of this psalm expresses with force the fiery trial Christ underwent and the interrogations of His soul. But, while the trial is difficult, sometimes mandatory and even painful, it is not the end.

Even though He did not have the physical strength to repeat the entire psalm, Christ had it all in His heart. And what do verses 25–31 tell us? The presence and God’s benevolent attention are the praise of the righteous and when finally recognized as such, the deliverance and the victory of the Lord and His justice are ultimate realities.

While it is an anguished expression of a doubt, the cry of Jesus is not the affirmation of real abandonment. It is a conquered doubt. As forgiveness allows one to overcome violence, trust in God surmounts feelings of abandonment at critical times. It is a resource for self-management.

Reflect:

- Does my faith drive me to open my eyes to the world in my area, on my street, in my building and to discern its needs and try to respond in an active and concrete way? Am I willing to sacrifice time, a meal or leisure opportunities for this?
- What reading or melody would help me to build up hope to survive a situation of extreme solitude or destitution?

49 Seven crucial statements—Part 3

5. “I am thirsty” (John 19:28).

This statement depicts a true and burning biological thirst, along with heat, physical weariness, pain, stress, and anguish. The need and its expression with the implicit request express and indicate Christ’s profound humanity. Far from feeling piety, exaltation or stoicism, Christ remains humble enough to recognize His need. He dares to plead.

It is an exception that a believer should experience such an extreme situation, yet in the case of Christ what a lesson of courage and authenticity! In common and less dramatic situations, should not the believer draw inspiration from this approach? Needs, emotions, desires, in whatever areas they are expressed, are at the core of human dynamics. Healthy self-management cannot start in negating or forgetting them. To identify and to express them to God or to a trusted friend or spiritual counselor are opportunities to grow and move toward constructive solutions. Thus, every expression of physical or emotional life can be in one way or another stimulating and invigorating.

This evocation of thirst reminds us of the episode of the Samaritan woman at the well (see John 4). Beyond the need of water for our bodies, human beings thirst for something else: the living God (see Psalm 42:2). This is a necessary pathway in order not to miss the true outcomes. There is no self-management without drawing for a long time and in all situations from sources of love, justice and truth.

6. “It is finished” (John 19:30).

As the concept of thirst is relevant to the Samaritan woman, that of completion reminds us of Christ’s meeting with Nicodemus. The completion of the work of love against evil is done by the elevation of the Son, paradoxically compared to that of a serpent in the desert (see John 3:14–17).

The Cross does not save by magic; it saves because it is the place, the time and the opportunity for a particular experience with God: that of salvation in faith received, lived and

experienced. The elevation of the bronze serpent saved from the fiery serpents, whereas that of the Son saves from sin and death. These elevations are malediction, death, radical condemnation of sin, of everything that opposes the love and justice of God. Therefore, the “new” birth is first of all a crucifixion (see Galatians 5:24)—an exposed destruction—of the principle of the old life.

We were once isolated, focused on our desires and passions, pride and selfishness, refusing God and His grace, unable to love. By accepting forgiveness and our new status as children of God in and by faith, our lives begin to produce fruit (see Galatians 5:22).

This reflection completes and corrects the previous one on thirst and the legitimate recognition of human needs. These needs are to be laid at the foot of the cross so that only what is transformed by God and is born of Him (see John 1:12, 13) can really live. If self-management disregarded this truth of life it would betray, in spite of all its wealth, its calling. Self-management is an effort for a more just relationship, in oneself, between opposites or constraints, death and life, lust and desire, less evil and good, laxity and suppleness, rigidity and rectitude.

Christ’s work is perfect and universal. While waiting for glorification, our work is more modest and remains unfinished. Yet the believer can in humility, without denying his or her failures, express joy for a journey lived, accomplished to his or her measure with the Lord.

Reflect:

- My limitations are numerous. By naming them, am I able to hand them over to God for Him to assume them and to help me overcome them?
- What does my thirst for God look like? What about my own thirst of love, justice and truth? How far do my various commitments that express this thirst?

50 Seven crucial statements—Part 4

7. “Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit” (Luke 23:46).

Christ was so permeated with Scripture that He thought, said, prayed and shouted it! We have already seen this when He cried out: “My God, why have you forsaken me?”

The ultimate statement of a human being is important. For Jesus, it is again a text from the Psalms: “I entrust my spirit into your hand” (Psalm 31:5). But look at the following verses: “Rescue me, Lord, for you are a faithful God. . . . I trust in the Lord. I am overcome with joy because of your unfailing love. . . . You have not handed me over to my enemy but have set me in a safe place” (Psalm 31:5–8). It is the perfection of relationship with the Father in total confidence—the seventh and last stage of man in His faithful response to God’s love.

Maturity does not lose sight of death as the final end of earthly existence. But it is not obsessed with death to the point of being haunted by it. Spiritual life is woven at the crossroad of love and death. It is a moment of potential fright and dizziness yet also a moment for the appraisal of life. Reflection on death makes one move back and allows for evaluation of life’s little annoyances in a different manner. Self-management must integrate this reflection.

Death is not a definitive annihilation since we remain in God’s memory. In that “unknown sphere” the relation with God our “Omega” still exists (see Revelation 21:6) and that is the strength of the peace that comes from God (see Philippians 4:7), that balances the terror of “not being” and “being no more,” soothes the suffering of separation and snatches the sting of death. But “I commit . . .” is required.

This does not come about by the stroke of a magic wand, it is the work of a lifetime. In self-management, the believer will train him- or herself to renounce, to detach or, in more contemporary terms, to “let go.” Christ did this before His incarnation (see Philippians 2:7).

As we mature into adulthood, we must learn to “let go” on a daily

basis. Because they love their child, parents will progressively reduce their influence. The one listening will focus on the one who is talking. To varying degrees, everyone must resist the temptation to maintain childish or selfish attachments or to cling to one's roles, status, powers, dreams, youth, vigor, health or to clutch to one's habits and abilities.

Learning to freely and willingly detach oneself without spiteful abandonment, to give up commands, share or relinquish responsibilities, to bid farewell to places, expertise and people. Whatever it may be, loss is a painful experience, but to manage loss in the light of Christ is about molding our "being." It is about choosing "what is better, and it will not be taken away" (see Luke 10:42). The most beautiful vocation is the transformation from having into being.

Seven statements. The assimilation of what they imply in our life is not an instantaneous miracle. It is the result of a long journey of listening, of dialoguing, of friendship, of sharing with the God of love. Is there a more beautiful definition of Christian self-management?

Reflect:

- Where am I personally on the journey of self-management?

51 | They rested on the Sabbath (Luke 23:56)

Despite Christ's extraordinary words on the cross, everything does not stop with death. There is yet the incredible event of life, His victory and resurrection. Between these two, however, life goes on as "usual" with its necessary rests.

In temperate climates, the natural cycle of vegetation does the same. Between its dormancy in autumn and its spring awakening, there is the winter sleep. The caterpillar follows the same pattern: before waking as a butterfly, it has to "die" as a chrysalis. These are parables to understand the invisible.

For the first man and woman, the creation Sabbath must have been an extraordinary, yet far-too-short experience of discovery and encounter with God, each other, nature, joy and life. By contrast, for Jesus' friends the Sabbath after the crucifixion must have been the longest and gloomiest day of their lives. They had a terrible time understanding the impossible and unbearable absence.

Like Sabbath, self-management can sometimes be the painful acknowledgment of an absence and the attempt to go beyond it. There may be times of doubt, emptiness, feelings of sterility or failure, where growth may seem futile. One may ask, is it worthwhile or even meaningful? Is it not better to lay down curled up, sad and silent, in the dark, like a fetus?

On the other hand, rest is often recreation, meaning action. Action of contemplation, of praise, of dedicating one's time as tithing is consecration of one's money. A forced rest can sometimes be perceived only as an interruption, a stop, linked with stagnation, discouragement or even a rupture.

But maybe—and this is what the post-crucifixion Sabbath, observed by the women in the gospels, can teach us—this rest becomes meditation, repositioning, gestation and invisible, imperceptible, unconscious but real and useful maturation.

We have used the metaphor of plant growth in this book. We could also have used the image of the construction of a building.

For example, when Solomon built the Temple, it is written that “the entire structure was built without the sound of hammer, ax, or any other iron tool at the building site” (1 Kings 6:7). This absence of noise obviously demonstrated reverence for the site but did not mean people were not doing anything. To the contrary, it shows that the enormous task of thinking, planning, architectural work, drawing, sketching, and extremely precise measuring had been done earlier.

In the same vein, Christian growth necessitates an important preparatory phase of planning, choosing methods, stockpiling materials, shaping and craftsmanship as implied by the use of the word “management.” But at certain times one also needs some “Sabbaths”—closing down, emptiness, self-questioning, integration pending the celestial Sabbath (see Hebrew 4:9–11) of exploding joy, seeing the triumph of life. The eye of faith, that is better informed of these things than the distraught disciples, will see in the apparent absence of Christ a work of God’s love for His people in the imminent expectation of victory.

Reflect:

- Are we living Sabbath as a preparation for a future as much as a contemplation of what has been done?
- How is Sabbath a hinge between the past and future for me?



52 | For to me, to live is Christ (Philippians 1:21)

The death of Christ was the climactic purpose of His fight for good, but it did not end His ministry and His teaching. For the Gospel reader, Good Friday and Sabbath are followed by Easter. Life and resurrection triumph over death.

The reader of Revelation or of the Epistle to the Hebrews also knows that Christ continues a ministry in heaven. These realities are of great importance for Christian self-management as a work of faith. Christ—the revelation of the living God—is also called “the living One” (see Luke 11:25; Revelation 1:18). He is life (see John 1:4; 5:26) and resurrection (see John 11:25).

When put into practice in a Christian manner, self-management cannot be mere development, in the “New Age” sense. It is a resurrection and even a series of resurrections in our lives. Maybe we are disappointed, discouraged by failures, by several unsuccessful endeavors, by the void in our life and skeptical about this self-management, at a standstill. It is precisely there that Christ is waiting for us with the word, “Arise” (see Matthew 9:5; Mark 5:41; 10:49; Luke 6:8; 7:14; 17:19; John 5:8). Christian life is a never-ending experience of ruptures, of life and death, of life after death. Of death: to ourselves, our sins, our mistakes, our failures, and of recovery: by faith in the Lordship of Christ on our lives.

Two examples—John the apostle and the penitent thief on the cross—show us that self-management is not an ideal and theoretical demand but a personal journey.

On one hand, a young life committed to Christ at the end of a long service gives testimony of an encouraging and motivating achievement. On the other hand, a man whose life has been a long string of mistakes but at the last moment sets out on the extraordinary journey of faith. This is an example, not a model, but it is encouraging. It is never too late to start the adventure. One should not use the pretext of one’s past, incompetence or failures to turn down the opportunity of a new start, of a last chance, of a resurrection. Between the two examples, is there

not room for all?

This reflection on self-management, is an invitation to you to build your own itinerary. Follow, explore, and delve into this itinerary according to your rhythm, convictions and needs in order to continue to enrich your experience. It may also be the opportunity to get into step and start what your inner being felt coming and desired for a long time without really having had enough motivation, courage or the means to realize it.

Time races for humanity and for each individual. On the fine thread of seconds that tick by, God grants us the chance of another time, another opportunity. This is time and opportunity for prayer (see Matthew 11:25; 1 Corinthians 7:5), divine intervention (see Luke 19:44), radical change and comfort (see Acts 3:19, 20), for benevolence (see Galatians 6:10) and realization (see Mark 1:15). That time has a name: it is called “now” (see Matthew 6:11; 21:28; Luke 4:21; 13:33; 23:43; Hebrews 4:7).

Reflect:

- Do I wish to live a mediocre life or to experience a life that, filled with Christ, may consist of endless satisfaction?
- What have I concretely discovered and built with the help of this book? In what ways am I richer in my inner self, closer to others, perhaps freer?
- Am I able to say with confidence that “Jesus is saving me today?”

On the way . . .

Self-training program for personal growth

1. I have a diary

yes, go to point 2

no, I will get one on __/__/__.

2. I already know in which area(s) God calls me to grow, to evolve, and to change!

yes, go to point 4

no, go to point 3

3. For -8-15-days, (cross out whatever does not apply), I am going to think about what should be the subject of a growth in my life (check every category progressively), to do that:

- I take my diary, set 20 minutes aside each day for an “Appointment with myself” (AWM) where I will be able, without fear of being disturbed, to pray and think seriously about this subject. I also make a note in a notebook or a pocketbook for an AWM 10 days from now to study point 4.
- I will set aside a page in my diary to record my thoughts, reflections, any idea that comes to

mind about the subject. To help me in this quest, I ask myself questions, for example:

- What is the meaning (hidden, maybe secret) of my life?
 - In what areas do I feel comfortable?
 - Who and how would I like to be in one or five years from now, and at the end of my life?
 - In what area do I feel I have to grow:
 - In my spiritual life—prayer, study and meditation of Scripture, involvement, others?
 - On a personal level—physical, character, talents, attitudes to life situations, past affects?
 - On a familial level—relationships: husband – wife, parents, children?
 - Professionally—activity, relations in and outside work?
 - During personal reading—Bible, Bible study, book of reflection—I have noted the following ideas:
- 4.** Make a list of precise and feasible objectives I would like to accomplish and classify them by order of priority.

5. With God's help, I choose to undertake the walk toward the goal.....

I date and sign my decision:

6. I know how to progress toward the chosen goal:

yes, go to point 8.

no, go to point 7.

7. Ask someone that I trust—friend, parent, brother or sister, elder, pastor—to suggest some tracks or tools to advance toward my objective. I note on my diary a precise AWM to approach point 8.

8. I establish a precise action plan on a special page kept in my notebook/pocketbook. This plan details the tasks to accomplish, the means I need to achieve them, the dates of various deadlines, and AWM to assess my progress and to take the necessary corrective measures. These AWM will be reported in my diary!

- 9.** In one month, I make an AWM to evaluate methodically the steps I went through from the first point: that will motivate me anew to continue to the end of my adventure.

Perhaps you think this is very demanding. Encourage yourself by reviewing Chapter 25!

At the cost of such tenacious work, Joseph was able to realize his dreams—and God is never far for those who seek Him with all their being.

Conclusion

“And remember, it is a message to obey, not just to listen to. If you don’t obey, you are only fooling yourself. . . . But if you keep looking steadily into God’s perfect law—the law that sets you free—and if you do what it says and don’t forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it” (James 1:22, 25).

The end of all things is near. There are small endings, like that of this book that is coming to its conclusion; there are others of much greater importance, like the termination of a life or the end of the world. However, for the believer, these ends have a common trait; they are not dead-ends or terminuses. They can be openings, starting points, revelations. This is the sincere hope of the Christian life-management (stewardship) team who thought through, conceived and gave their best to produce the valuable material you now have in hand.

This “manual” doesn’t claim to be perfect or complete. This was not its intention. If in your reflections, in your prayer life, your readings, other creative ideas, other ways for self-management come to mind, would you be willing to share them with us? Tell us about the positive experiences lived as a result of reading these pages. Do not hesitate either to send us your critiques and suggestions, because we hope you have understood our goal: the enrichment of all. Maybe you also have some legitimate frustrations because you would have liked to examine in depth certain itineraries that were only lightly mentioned, or to travel over others. Write to us about these needs, or interests. Correspondence by letters or emails would create a network of relations, of exchanges that would be a “help to growth” for all.

“I called my Son out of Egypt” (Matt 2:15). Who is this son? Of course, in his most profound interpretation, Matthew indicates Christ. But for the prophet mentioned by the evangelist, it was the people of Israel.

It is also, Joseph the father of Jesus. It is again, symbolically, Joseph the son and true genealogy of Jacob (see Genesis 37:2). But by actualizing this biblical message, the son can also be every one of us.

Egypt is slavery, unbelief and idolatry. Is this not, precisely what our lives are when they are undeveloped, when they are left to themselves? God is not happy about it and He appeals to us. Moreover, if you have reached this point in your reading, we assume that you too are not satisfied with an existence “in Egypt” and have heard this invitation.

Coming out of Egypt then becomes a metaphor and a promise of divine action of liberation and achievement. Christ has realized this achievement, whose secret and strength He is. This is a model. Joseph, chronologically far from us but closer to us through his vulnerability and life journey, is an example—the example of God’s promise accomplished.

This should stimulate and encourage us so that: the reading of this book does not remain a dead-letter, we do not remain in the “Egypt” of our middle-class habits, of our sterile listening, and we progress toward the Promised Land of happy practice (see James 1:25), of self-management. We grow while waiting for the day when our Lord will introduce us to His kingdom.

May the God of Joseph and of Jesus Christ be your inspiration, may He give you strength and nourish your perseverance. This is our fervent prayer for you. Even though we do not know you personally, God knows you. May He bless you.

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