

EXERCISE 1

A Heart Is Created: God, Creation, and Me

God looked at everything he had made and
found it very good.

—Genesis 1:31

Put your hand on your heart. Feel. Wait for ten seconds. Listen. What do you hear? *Pum bum, pum bum*. Your heart is quietly giving you life at this very moment. It pumps life and blood through your body every day, every minute—and yet you might rarely notice this miracle. Your heart is a symbol of Christ's love for you. There he is—quietly, powerfully loving you. Giving you life and love. Pouring out his life and blood for you. Do you notice?

I notice my heart when it is pounding before a big presentation, when I see an old friend, when I'm running, and when

I'm excited, afraid, or overjoyed. *Ba-bum, ba-bum, ba-bum!* I notice these physical signs and so do you . . . sometimes. But what about spiritual signs? How can we notice Jesus' love for us more often and more deeply? Jesus made our hearts, and he wants us to notice his heart.

Who am I? What am I? Let these questions drift through your mind and heart. For example, I am a son, a brother, a priest, an American, a man, a friend, a teacher, and a sinner. Yet who am I really? St. Ignatius of Loyola points us to the truth of our human identity: we are beloved sons and daughters of God. He writes, "I will consider how God dwells in creatures . . . in human beings, giving us intelligence, and finally how in this way he dwells also in myself, giving me existence, life, sensation, and intelligence; and even further making me his temple, since I am created as a likeness and image of his divine majesty" (*SE*, 235). Ignatius points us to the opening chapter of Genesis. There we see the Father shaping, handcrafting Adam and Eve. The scriptures show us how the human race is the pinnacle of God's creation. God made us, and God sees that we are "very good" (Gn 1:31).

Since we are made in God's image, we are like God. We have an ability to know, understand, speak, listen, and love. God has all knowledge, and God *is* love; still, we share in his gifts in our own, human way. Our hearts are made in the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. His heart beats with love for us, even at this very moment. *Pum bum, pum bum.*

We aren't perfect, of course, but let's focus on how we resemble God in his goodness. Imagine God looking at you with joy

and love. He is pleased. He did a good job, a “very good” job in fact. God looks upon your heart and smiles. What do you feel in your heart when you see God looking at you? Are you happy? Embarrassed? For many of us, seeing ourselves as made in the image of God is not easy, even though we are made for communion with the Lord. Yet the truth is that God desires a loving relationship with us in this life and in eternal life.

Our culture often emphasizes the things that are wrong with us. Advertisements constantly tell us we’re not wealthy enough, not beautiful enough, not strong enough, and not cool enough. Yet sometimes we do get a glimpse of our true identity as beloved sons and daughters of the Father. I’ll share an example from my own life when I experienced this truth.

LITTLE ADAM IN A RURAL EDEN

I grew up in the suburbs of St. Louis, Missouri, and my grandparents had a farm about an hour outside the city. As kids, my sister and I would often go there for a long weekend with Grandma and Granddad. I know my parents loved us, but I’m sure they were grateful to have a quiet weekend now and then while my sister and I were away in the country. For me, these trips were a little taste of Eden.

On a typical long weekend, my grandparents would pick us up on a Saturday morning. My grandfather drove one of those massive Buicks that were popular in the 1970s; it was like a giant green yacht on wheels. My sister, Katie, and I would run out of the house to the car with our bags. Mom and Dad would

follow, hug us, and tell us to be good. We'd hug Grandma and Granddad, put the bags in the trunk, and slide onto that slick vinyl backseat. After a friendly honk that reverberated through the neighborhood, we'd be off.

An hour later, my sister and I would wake up in the backseat, just as the car started rumbling down the gravel road. An old country song played quietly on the radio. We'd see the red barn, the little bridge, and my grandparents' farmhouse. They still owned a house in the suburbs; this was their weekend place—a scenic spot for rest and recreation. The Buick would lurch slightly as Granddad pulled into the gravel driveway.

We'd grab our bags as Grandma opened the house. Granddad reached deeper into the trunk for their bags, along with a cooler and grocery bags. We had a familiar ritual of quickly unpacking and immediately suggesting foods for my grandma to make: "Fried chicken! Apple pie! Bacon and eggs!" Grandma promised to make all of our favorites, as usual. But first she wanted to look at the garden with my sister, while my granddad and I went to the barn to check on the animals.

Grandpa was tall and lanky, as I am now; back then I was a pudgy kid with a mess of brown hair. He could have walked faster, but he went slowly so that I could keep up, taking three steps for every one of his. As we walked, he'd stop to point out little details in nature. As we crossed the creek, he said, "See here, JW?" This was his nickname for me, the initials of my first and middle name, Joseph William. "Right here, these little fish. Those aren't really fish. They're tadpoles. They'll get bigger and

turn into frogs.” I had heard this from my science teacher in school, but seeing them with Granddad made it alive and real. After poking around in the stream with a stick for a minute, he continued. “And here, see this pink flower? Well, that flower will turn into an apple. And then we can pick them, and your grandma can make them into a nice apple pie.” He’d also ask me about my classes at school, my baseball team, and my parents. We’d continue our journey together to the barn, and then head to the fish pond.

As I look back on it, these weekends with my grandparents were a kind of rural Eden. I was like a little eight-year-old Adam, with my grandpa as a loping God the Father. He took time with me. He literally bent down to speak at my level. He did not create apple trees, but he did cultivate and care for them. I am literally made in my grandfather’s likeness, as I resemble him in my appearance and temperament. In the same way, God has made all of us in his very image and likeness, giving us qualities that he himself possesses.

Sometimes we simply need a place of quiet to see the Lord and to see ourselves more clearly. For me, it was the quiet and beauty of my grandparents’ country home and the patient attention of my grandfather that granted me this perspective. A retreat can also offer a place of peace, where we set aside the busy confusion of daily life. Even a ten-day retreat in daily life can be an opportunity to receive the peace and grace that we seek.

JESUS SAYS, “COME AWAY BY
YOURSELVES TO A DESERTED PLACE
AND REST A WHILE” (MK 6:31)

We all seek peace and rest, but they aren't always easy to find. Often, we need a change from our daily routines to find them. It's not that daily life is bad, but it somehow dulls our senses. After a weekend with my grandparents, I returned to school the next week refreshed and renewed. I was more attentive in science class; I was kinder to my sister who shared the joyful trip with me. I had a deeper sense of gratitude for my family, myself, and the Lord who made me.

Jesus sends out his disciples to preach and teach. They come back and tell him “all that they had done and taught” (Mk 6:30). Then Jesus invites them to “come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest” (Mk 6:31). Ignatius encourages us to take time away for a retreat. So often we have “our mind divided among many matters”; we are renewed when we can “concentrate instead all our attention on one alone, namely, the service of our Creator and our own spiritual progress” (*SE*, 20). We need to reflect on what we have done and what has happened. We need quiet time alone with Jesus, away from the busyness of towns and cities.

Jesus sent us out to work, to study, to help our families. And he says, “I will give you rest. Come away by yourselves.” On retreat, Christ can cultivate his relationship with us, so that it can flourish and bear great fruit. To be with him, we must leave certain things behind. We need to set aside email, phone calls,

television, and other distractions. Even thirty to sixty minutes can make a big difference.

You have begun this ten-day retreat because you, too, seek a place of peace and rest. Jesus has invited you to come away with him on this retreat—and you said yes. A retreat, even one in the midst of our daily routines, is an opportunity to encounter the heart of Christ. In the quiet, we can hear his heart beat. We can hear our own hearts, too. This can be disconcerting, even alarming. We crave his peace and yet, paradoxically, at the same time we fear being in his presence! Again, hear our Savior’s gentle invitations to you: “Come away with me,” and “Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart” (Mt 11:29). Our hearts are restless; they find rest with his Sacred Heart.

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. Go to your prayer spot, and sit in a comfortable place to begin your time of prayer. Begin by saying one of the prayers found in the appendix: perhaps the Morning Offering or the *Anima Christi*.
2. Put your hand on your heart. Recall that God made your heart, and it is very good. Keep your hand there for thirty beats. How are you feeling right now? Write a brief description in your journal; describe both your physical and emotional states. Are you happy, tired, sad or something else? Tell Jesus about this: “Lord, right now I feel . . .” Is there anything the Lord wants to say to you?

3. Read Genesis 1:26–31, and imagine God’s new creation. Picture the green plants, breathe in the fresh air, and feel the peace of God’s handiwork.
4. Imagine God joyfully forming you as a tiny child in your mother’s womb and his knowledge that even before your birth, you were already “very good.” How do you think your parents felt when they learned that your mother was pregnant with you? How do you feel as you imagine yourself newly created by God?
5. My grandparents’ farm was a holy place for me. Is there a holy place that you have encountered in your life? This might be a favorite vacation spot, a trip to Rome, or a previous retreat. Recall this place in your mind. Remember the sights, sounds, smells, and people. How did you feel when you were there? How was God present to you in this place? Jot down a few words describing this holy place and your experiences there.