

DAY 1

# HE LOVES US FIRST

Consider how all good things and gifts descend from above . . . justice, goodness, piety, mercy and so forth—just as the rays come down from the sun, or the rains from their source.

—*Spiritual Exercises*, 237

I don't remember my nine months in the womb. I imagine I loved it there. Those first nine months were a "school of the heart": my heart was formed; I was loved by God and by my family. I was in a place of peace, rest, warmth, and safety. Hearing my mom's gentle hum as she went about her day—running errands, doing yard work, and preparing my room. My little heart, beating underneath my mom's heart; a little duet of life and love. The murmur of kind words and blessings from relatives at family gatherings. "You're having a boy! I'm so happy for you! When's he due?" My birth was a big shock for me, I'm sure—the hospital's bright lights, cold air; a doctor in a white

coat grabbing me, cleaning me, weighing and measuring me. This was followed by more comforting moments: being wrapped in blankets, kissed by Mom, and held by Dad. Weeks later I'd be brought to church for Baptism at my home parish, Sacred Heart Church, a soaring gothic structure outside St. Louis built by German immigrants in the late 1800s. Fr. Jack Schuler baptized me. He is my dad's cousin; he was in his mid-twenties then, dressed in white vestments, recently ordained. While my grandparents and godparents sang and prayed, Fr. Jack poured water over me, baptizing, "Joseph William, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." With holy oil, he traced the Cross on my forehead and over my heart, sealing me with the grace of Holy Spirit.

In John's gospel, we see the heart of Jesus pierced by the soldier's lance as he hangs on the cross, and out pours blood and water. The water is an image of Baptism, and his blood is poured out in the Eucharist at every Mass. Truly the sacraments of the Church flow from his Sacred Heart. In the church of the Sacred Heart, my tiny heart was drawn into the love of his mighty heart.

This is the mystery of Christian life. We are made in love by a loving God. "God is love," as St. John tells us (1 Jn 4:8). A few lines later, he writes, "He first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19). My parents, family, and parish were tangible signs of this love. I did not earn this love nor even ask for it. This gift of love was simply given to me in love.

As a priest, I've worked with young couples preparing for Baptism. Together they hope, pray, wait, and love—entrusting

their child to Christ through the Church even before seeing the child's face. A mother gently places her hand on her tummy, feeling the movements of her unborn child, singing and humming even before she sees the child's face. The father also shares in this loving gesture, putting his hand on his wife's hand, smiling, gently patting, and saying, "Love you, baby. We'll see you in a few weeks." They talk to and pray for their child; they choose a name. Their love for their child is an image of God's love for the child. This love is unconditional and joyful. God's love is eternal and infinite. While his love is always greater than human love, like these parents, his "love is patient, [his] love is kind. It is not jealous. . . . [His] love never fails" (1 Cor 13:4, 8).

Looking at this couple, I imagine what my own parents must have thought and felt. As Christians, we ask to live in this sense of wonder. God loves us. God creates us in love. God places us in a family and in the Church in great love. God is love.

## OVERVIEW OF THE DAY FROM IGNATIUS: LOVE IS THE BEGINNING

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In the *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius writes, "I will see and consider the three Divine Persons, seated, so to speak, on the royal canopied throne of their Divine Majesty. They are gazing on the whole face and circuit of the earth; and they see all the peoples" (*SE*, 106). As we begin this journey with the heart of Jesus, let's consider this truth: *in the beginning there was love*. We hear these words echoed in three places in the Bible. The book of Genesis opens, "In the beginning, when God created the

heavens and the earth" (1:1). We see this phrase again at the start of John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word" (1:1). And, third, "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8). God was there when the world began. God existed even before the world was created. God is spirit, God is eternal and infinite, and God is love. God made us, loves us, and sees us. We are made by God and placed in a family. We are made for relationship with God and with others. We are created in love. We are created for love.

"Ponder with deep affection how much  
 God our Lord has done for me, and  
 how much he has given me of what he  
 possesses" (SE, 234).

### CONTEMPLATION: EXPERIENCING GOD'S LOVE

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We will start in the glory of heaven, beholding the eternal Trinity. John's gospel begins at the beginning, before time began:

In the beginning was the Word,  
 and the Word was with God,  
 and the Word was God.  
 He was in the beginning with God.  
 All things came to be through him,  
 and without him nothing came to be.  
 What came to be through him was life,  
 and this life was the light of the human race;

the light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness has not overcome it. (Jn  
1:1–5)

Let's use our imagination to reflect on this scene. We first use the sense of sight as we ask to see and consider the blessed Trinity in the glory of heaven. Here we may recall scenes from Christian art to help us see God. In the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo portrays God the Father as a strong, wise man, with a purple robe and flowing beard. The Holy Spirit is sometimes seen as a dove, a flame, or a wise man like God the Father.

As we profess in the Nicene Creed, we believe in "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God." God is Father, Son, and Spirit. God is a family, a community, a relationship. God is a Trinity of Divine Persons. Some artists portray the Trinity as three divine kings lovingly presiding over creation. Others paint this as an image of glory and light. Let us also use our sense of hearing. Some saints hear the Trinity as a symphony of three notes sung in perfect harmony. What might the Trinity say to one another? St. Ignatius invites us to "hear what the Divine Persons are saying." We hear words between Jesus and the Father in the gospels: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," says the Father (Mt 3:17). Jesus says, "Now glorify me, Father, with you, with the glory that I had with you before the world began" (Jn 17:5). Jesus proclaims, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (Jn 14:11).

St. Ignatius also encourages each of us to "reflect upon myself to draw some profit" (SE, 114). We may ask, "How do

I feel as I reflect upon the glory of God? Joyful and hopeful? Overwhelmed and confused?” Maybe our hearts are moved with humility as we consider our own weakness before God’s grandeur.

Next, let us look at the beauty of God’s creation. “I will consider how all good things and gifts descend from above . . . just as rays come down from the sun, or the rains from their source” (*SE*, 237). God says, “Let there be light, and there was light” (Gn 1:3). “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” states the US Constitution, “that all men are created equal.” The beauty and goodness of the created world is similarly self-evident: take a walk in a park near your house. Open your eyes to see the sun, the clouds, and the trees. Open your ears to hear the birds chirping, children playing, and dogs barking. Smell the flowers. Feel the soft, wet grass with your hand and the cool wind blowing on your cheek. These are tangible signs of God’s goodness. Ponder “how much God our Lord has done for me, and how much he has given me of what he possesses, and consequently how he, the same Lord, desires to give me” (*SE*, 234).

Now consider God creating you. God handcrafted you in great love, from the first moment of your conception. For this part of the contemplation, you may want to find some of your baby pictures in an old photo album. Is there a sonogram or ultrasound image of you? At that visit, the doctor may have placed a stethoscope on your mom’s stomach and said, “I can hear the heartbeat. Do you want to listen?” Placing the headset on your mom, she could now hear your tiny heartbeat. God

shapes this heart and loves this heart, your heart. In the photos, look at your parents looking at you. Perhaps they were a young couple, and you were their firstborn. Or maybe they were older, and you were a surprise pregnancy! If you were adopted, then consider how your adopted parents felt when they received you. With great trust, your birth mother offered you to adoptive parents who received you with anticipation and gratitude. Similarly, you may want to find photos of your baptism or your baptismal certificate. For many of us, this moment occurred when we were tiny babies, before we were consciously aware of Christ drawing us in to his divine life and love. Through the priest, through the Church, Christ himself baptized us. Using your imagination, you can reflect on the songs that were sung that day, the scent of the candles, the smiles on the faces of your family and friends.

Now look at God looking at you. “I will raise my mind and think how God our Lord is looking at me, and other such thoughts. Then I will make an act of reverence” (*SE*, 75). Reflect how this is the same Divine Trinity I beheld earlier, gazing at the world with wisdom and love. Now, God looks upon me from the first moments of my life. God gazes upon me now and always with great love.

### *Questions and Exercises*

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1. What is your favorite image of God? Perhaps Christ the Good Shepherd or the Sacred Heart of Jesus. What draws you to this image? What aspects of God are emphasized:

power, compassion, wisdom? If you have this image in your house, take a few minutes in prayerful reflection before this image. Or you may want to look for one online; consider using it as the “wallpaper” on your phone for the week.

2. Reread the opening lines of the book of Genesis. Imagine that you were there as a witness. We see images of Michelangelo’s masterpiece in the Sistine Chapel, portraying the creation of the world. Let your heart be moved with wonder and awe. Jot down a few words describing this scene in your journal.
3. Reflect on God creating you. Look at God looking at you with love in the first moments of your life. Find a few baby pictures of yourself or photos of your baptism. Who was there with you? How do they look? How do they look at you? How do you feel as you ponder this experience?
4. Is there anything you want to say to God in prayer now? Is there anything he wants to say to you?
5. For those who read *Abide in the Heart of Christ*, go back to your Spiritual Top 10 list. Review these moments and thank God for them. These are moments of special closeness to God. They might include weddings, family vacations, or other experiences (a retreat, time in prayer, etc.).



## **MY CREATOR AT MY CREATION**

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Lord, you have searched me and you know me:  
you know when I sit and stand;  
you understand my thoughts from afar.  
You created the moon and the stars,  
And in great love you made me in your image and  
likeness.

From the first moments of my life,  
As you formed me in my mother's womb,  
You shaped my very face  
Before my mother could kiss my face.  
I praise you, because I am wonderfully made;  
Know me, God, and know my heart.

—adapted from Psalm 139

