



## **Spiritual Keynote – Personal Encounter with Christ – Fr. Mark**

For many Catholics, the phrase a “Personal Relationship with Christ” or a “Personal Encounter with Christ” might seem like a Protestant phrase more than a Catholic phrase. To set some groundwork for this talk, it is important to first look at the Scriptures themselves and at the historical basis for the accuracy and the importance of using the phrase a “Personal Relationship with Christ”.

Peter Herbeck wrote in 2014: *“There are numerous Magisterial and Papal documents that use the exact phrase ‘personal relationship’ with God. It is perfectly clear that the terminology is not inherently Protestant or alien to proper Catholic sensibilities. Consider the following examples:*

*Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation describes how God has designed the human person in His image and likeness precisely to enable us to know Him personally: “The invisible God (see Col. 1:15, 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of his love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that he may invite and take them into fellowship with himself.” (DV§2).*

*The Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church says that proclamation and conversion must be, “sufficient to make a man realize that he has been snatched away from sin and led into the mystery of God’s love, who called him to enter into a personal relationship with Him in Christ” (AG§13).*

*God seeks a relationship with each one of us that is personal. Pope St. Pope John Paul II in his Encyclical Redemptoris Missio said: “In the complex reality of mission, initial proclamation has a central and irreplaceable role, since it introduces man ‘into the mystery of the love of God, who invites him to enter into a personal relationship with himself in Christ’ and opens the way to conversion.” (RMiss§44*

*The Bible “gives rise to a personal relationship” because Jesus reveals Himself to us on every page. The Holy Spirit, the one who “searches the depths of God,” (1 Cor 2:10) inspires that word in such a way that we actually encounter Christ in the words of scripture. He speaks directly to our spirit, enabling us to know Him.*

*To say, “I have a personal relationship with Jesus,” is simply to say that I know, with deep personal conviction, that God knows me and He loves me. I know it because while I was yet a sinner, Christ died for me (Rom 5:8); He poured His love into my heart through the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5). Through the Holy Spirit, I have seen what God has prepared for me in Christ Jesus (1 Cor 2:9-10); I have come to understand the gifts bestowed on me by God (1 Cor 2:12). By His mercy I have “tasted the heavenly gift ... the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the age to come” (Heb 6:4-5).*

It is very important for us to remember that Scripture is the living Word of God. When we read God’s Word, we encounter God Himself. St. Jerome said that *“Ignorance of Scriptures is Ignorance of Christ.”* As we read the Gospels, we notice that Jesus lived with the 12 Apostles for three years. They were not simply followers of Jesus, but they were also his brothers and friends who knew and supported Him in an intimate way. We are all called to enter into a friendship with

Jesus whether we are a religious, a layperson, a deacon or priest, single or married. As we enter into a friendship with Jesus, we are also called to enter into a friendship with other Christians.

Pope St. John Paul II wrote: *“It is necessary to awaken again in believers a full relationship with Christ, mankind’s only Savior. For only from a personal relationship with Jesus can an effective evangelization develop.”* Pope Benedict XVI in the Encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, wrote: *“Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”* Pope Benedict XVI in his message for World Youth Day in Madrid in 2011 said: *“Enter into a personal dialogue with Jesus Christ and cultivate it in faith. Get to know him better by reading the Gospels and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Converse with him in prayer, and place your trust in him. He will never betray that trust!”* Pope Francis during General Audiences in 2017 talked about Mass as prayer and as a loving encounter with God through his Word and the Body and Blood of Jesus. It is an encounter with the Lord.

It is also important to hear what some of the Saints have said or written about having a personal relationship with Jesus. **St. Ambrose** in an exposition of psalm 118 wrote these words:

*“My Father and I will come and make our home with him. Let your door stand open to receive him, unlock your soul to him, offer him a welcome in your mind, and then you will see the riches of simplicity, the treasures of peace, the joy of grace. Throw wide the gate of your heart, stand before the sun of the everlasting light that shines on every man. This true light shines on all, but if anyone closes his window, he will deprive himself of eternal light. If you shut the door of your mind, you shut out Christ. Though he can enter, he does not want to force his way in rudely, or compel us to admit him against our will.”*

**St. Augustine** in a Reflection on the First Letter of John wrote these words:

*“The entire life of a good Christian is in fact an exercise of holy desire. You do not yet see what you long for, but the very act of desiring prepares you, so that when he comes you may see and be utterly satisfied.”*

*“Suppose you are going to fill some holder or container, and you know you will be given a large amount. Then you set about stretching your sack or wineskin or whatever it is. Why? Because you know the quantity you will have to put in it and your eyes tell you there is not enough room. By stretching it, therefore, you increase the capacity of the sack, and this is how God deals with us. Simply by making us wait he increases our desire, which in turn enlarges the capacity of our soul, making it able to receive what is to be given to us. ... By desiring heaven, we exercise the powers of our soul. Now this exercise will be effective only to the extent that we free ourselves from desires leading to infatuation with this world. Let me return to the example I have already used, of filling an empty container. God means to fill each of you with what is good; so, cast out what is bad! If he wishes to fill you with honey and you are full of sour wine, where is the honey to go? The vessel must be emptied of its contents and then be cleansed. Yes, it must be cleansed even if you have to work hard and scour it. It must be made fit for the new thing, whatever it may be.”*

Finally, it is important to hear the words of **Thomas à Kempis**, who wrote the famous **Imitation of Christ**. Thomas à Kempis was a German priest living in the Netherlands during the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It is a challenging book, one that exhorts a person to holiness while also highlighting the personal relationship one should have with Jesus Christ. Many saints (*St. Therese of Lisieux, St. Ignatius Loyola, St. Thomas More, St. Dominic Savio, St. Alphonsus Liguori*) have found spiritual

nourishment in the Imitation of Christ and have been led to even greater holiness. Even the Methodist founder John Wesley said it was the best summary of the Christian life he had ever read.

This book was written during that the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the hundred years before Luther when (allegedly) the corruption of the Church was at its height and Catholic spirituality was (allegedly) both superficial and superstitious. This is a good book to refer to if someone alleges that the Church's tradition or spirituality discourages us from having a personal friendship with Christ our Lord. A' Kempis writes [*On The Intimate Friendship of Jesus (Book 2, Chapter 8)*]:

*“If Jesus be with you, no enemy can harm you. He who finds Jesus finds a rare treasure, indeed, a good above every good, whereas he who loses Him loses more than the whole world. The man who lives without Jesus is the poorest of the poor, whereas no one is so rich as the man who lives in His grace. It is a great art to know how to converse with Jesus, and great wisdom to know how to keep Him. Be humble and peaceful, and Jesus will be with you. Be devout and calm, and He will remain with you. You may quickly drive Him away and lose His grace, if you turn back to the outside world. And, if you drive Him away and lose Him, to whom will you go and whom will you then seek as a friend? You cannot live well without a friend, and if Jesus be not your friend above all else, you will be very sad and desolate. Thus, you are acting foolishly if you trust or rejoice in any other. Choose the opposition of the whole world rather than offend Jesus.”*

*“Of all those who are dear to you, let Him be your special love. Let all things be loved for the sake of Jesus, but Jesus for His own sake. Jesus Christ must be loved alone with a special love for He alone, of all friends, is good and faithful. For Him and in Him you must love friends and foes alike, and pray to Him that all may know and love Him. Never desire special praise or love, for that belongs to God alone Who has no equal. Never wish that anyone's affection be centered in you, nor let yourself be taken up with the love of anyone, but let Jesus be in you and in every good man. Be pure and free within, unentangled with any creature. You must bring to God a clean and open heart if you wish to attend and see how sweet the Lord is.”*

*“Truly you will never attain this happiness unless His grace prepares you and draws you on so that you may forsake all things to be united with Him alone. When the grace of God comes to a man, he can do all things, but when it leaves him, he becomes poor and weak, abandoned, as it were, to affliction. Yet, in this condition he should not become dejected or despair. On the contrary, he should calmly await the will of God and bear whatever befalls him in praise of Jesus Christ, for after winter comes summer, after night, the day, and after the storm, a great calm.”*

Now, after laying the foundation for a Catholic understanding of a personal encounter with Christ from the Scriptures, Church teaching, and the saints, I transition to sharing about my “Personal Encounter with Christ”. It is important for me to observe that there is not any one particular moment or encounter, but rather many different encounters throughout my life.

I grew up on a farm a mile north of the little town of Elmwood, which is East of Lincoln, Nebraska. My parents (Vincent and Theresa Seiker) lived on the farm all their lives until they retired and moved to Lincoln in 2000. I am the 2<sup>nd</sup> of 5 children; 4 boys and a girl.

As a boy growing up on the farm, there were always chores to do. I have been blessed by God with many gifts including practical mechanical skills. Much of my life I have been a “do'er”. It wasn't until years after I was ordained a priest that I realized that I was a “human being” and not a “human doing”.

In our family, my parents lived the Faith very well. I never remember the question ever being asked: “Are we going to Mass on Sunday?” Sunday Mass was a regular part of our week. We also didn’t have to debate when we were going to Mass, because the mission Parish that we belonged to had 35 families in the Parish. The Pastor lived in the Rectory beside the “mother Parish” 11 miles away. Our Parish had a 9:00am Sunday morning Mass and during Lent sometimes there were Stations of the Cross or Mass on Fridays. That was it. Once a month, we would go to Church early and those children old enough would go to Confession. If we went to visit relatives, we knew we were going to go to Mass at their Church.

Anytime we were in the car for more than 15 minutes, we knew we were going to pray a Rosary. We also learned that not only were we going to pray the Rosary, but that each of the children (when they were old enough to lead a decade of the Rosary) would also be responsible for knowing the names of the Mysteries of the Rosary and announcing that Mystery before leading the decade.

All meals started with the prayer before meals, and no one left the table until the prayers after meals were prayed. As the children got older, often there were family discussions after the evening meals. Mom would collect all of the dishes and take them to the kitchen sink and soak them in water so that the food did not get “stuck on the dishes” and then we would have a family discussion around the table. Often after the discussion had been going on for some time, my sister would say: “Let’s pray.” I am not sure it was so much that she wanted to pray. She had just learned that the meal wasn’t finished until we prayed and the prayers weren’t prayed until the discussion was finished. Thus, when she thought the discussion had gone on long enough, she would say: “Let’s pray.”

During October and May, we would pray a Family Rosary after supper before the prayers after Meals. We also prayed some special Advent prayers and the Novena to the Holy Spirit before Pentecost each year. My Mom volunteered to teach CCD classes to the Kindergarten and Preschool children as we got older. Thus, it was understood that the children would be participating in those CCD Classes.

The Summer between my 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade, my parents decided that all that they were doing to teach us the Faith, which was a lot, was not enough. They decided that they wanted to send us to a Catholic School. So, they bought a new 1965 Chevy Impala Station Wagon (the only new car that I ever remember them owning; every other car was a used car). They started driving us 23 miles into Lincoln and 23 miles back each day so we could attend a Catholic School.

Mom would drive most of the time and get a part time job cleaning or babysitting and after a few years volunteering in the School Library. When the Farm work was finished Dad would get a part time job in Lincoln and drive four days a week. Mom would still drive one day a week to coordinate the volunteers in the School Library and to buy groceries.

I remember sitting in the car for 30 minutes each day thinking: “there is a Public School right next to our Farm, where I went to School for Kindergarten, First, and Second Grade ... why are we driving all this way?” It didn’t make a lot of sense to me at first, but slowly I started to figure out the value of a Catholic Education.

The Summer between my Sophomore and Junior years, our family moved into a 12’ x 65’ mobile home trailer, and tore down our 80-year-old farm house. We saved the lumber and used it to build a new house. That was family togetherness and more family discussions. During the next

Summer, one evening when I went to bed, I overheard a conversation that my older brother Steve was having with my parents in the living room about the possibility of his going to the Seminary to study to be a Priest. I remember thinking *“If Steve goes to the Seminary that means that I can’t go to the Seminary.”* That was not an accurate thought, but I remember thinking it.

At this point, it is important to mention that my Mom is one of 13 children and two of her brothers are Priests. My Dad is one of 5 children and one of his sisters is a Religious Sister. I grew up not just experiencing Priests at Mass or Sisters in the classroom, but as members of the family, who would be present at extended family gatherings. They also often joined us for evening meals in our home. Because of the example of my parents living the Faith and because I was around my two uncles who were Priests, as a young grade school child, I began to think about the possibility that God was calling me to be a Priest. When I got to High School, those thoughts were less present in my mind.

Now, I return to my brother Steve entering the Seminary. Steve was in the Seminary for two years (*during my Senior year in High School and my Freshman year at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln*) before he discerned that God was not calling him to be a Priest. However, during those two years, Steve and some of his seminarian friends and I would go out for supper or see a movie or some other activity. I experienced these seminarians as “ordinary college students” and yet there was something different about them. They seemed to have a sense of peace and calm about them.

Meeting these seminarians was a very important part of my choosing to enter the Seminary. I had known single men and single women, married men and married women, and Priests and Sisters. Meeting these seminarians was an important “connecting point”. Here is how you get from being a single man to being a Priest.

After that experience of meeting seminarians, I accepted an invitation to go on a Retreat for young men thinking about the Priesthood. One evening we had Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. Spending an hour with our Lord present in the Blessed Sacrament and also having the opportunity to listen to a Priest speak about the history of Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and about the Priesthood was very helpful. The Lord was slowly and steadily leading me in my encounters with Him. I met the Lord through my parents and their lived Faith, and through the Priests, Sisters, and lay teachers in the Catholic School. Then, I was able to encounter Jesus in a different way through Seminarians. That slow steady process of encountering Jesus helped me to make the commitment to enter the Seminary.

One of the first evenings in the Seminary, I very clearly remember having a very close moment with Christ as we were praying Night Prayer or Compline from the Liturgy of the Hours. The words of the Antiphon for the Canticle of Simeon: *“Protect us, Lord, as we stay awake; watch over us as we sleep, that awake, we may keep watch with Christ, and asleep, rest in his peace.”* touched my heart in a very powerful way. I remember thinking that I need to put a book mark on this page so that I can come back to that Antiphon again. Little did I know at the time that I would be praying that Antiphon every night for the rest of my life during Night Prayer. And, even though it is prayed every day, praying that Antiphon is still a very powerful moment each evening.

In November of the first year that I was in the Seminary, Bishop Glennon Flavin (the Bishop of Lincoln at that time), stopped at the Seminary to visit the Seminarians after being at the Annual Fall Meeting of the Bishops of the United States. Bishop Flavin gathered all of the seminarians from the Lincoln Diocese together in the Rector’s private living room and visited with us. He talked to us about prayer and shared with us a very practical example of how to pray using the acronym **ACTS**.

which he told us would help us remember the four types of prayer: Adoration, Contrition, Thanksgiving, and Supplication (a big word that means petition).

The following is a paraphrase from my memory of how Bishop Flavin prayed with us (over forty years ago) to teach us seminarians about personal prayer with Jesus:

Adoration ... I adore and praise You, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for creating everything that is and for creating me. I praise You for the wonder and beauty of all of creation and for this beautiful day. I especially praise and worship You present in the Scriptures and in the Blessed Sacrament.

Contrition ... Lord Jesus, I am sorry for not always putting you first in my daily life. I am sorry for spending too much time on things that I like to do rather than fulfilling my duties. I am sorry for not being patient with myself and especially for not being patient with others around me. I am sorry for those unkind words that said to my neighbor today. Then Bishop Flavin said that at this point, we might get distracted in our prayer and notice our stomach growling and begin wondering what we are going to have for supper because I sure am feeling hungry. He encouraged us not to focus on our stomach or the distractions, but to gently refocus ourselves by praying something like: Jesus, I am sorry that my mind is distracted by my stomach, and I want to move on to thanking You.

Thanksgiving ... I thank You, Jesus, for the gift of life and for the gift of my Faith. Thank You for the gift of my parents and my family. Thank you for the Catholic Church that You started and for this Seminary where our seminarians are being taught the Faith. Thank You for our country and the freedom that we enjoy. Thank You for the farmers who grow our food and for other persons who process and make our food. Thank you for the Religious Sisters who are preparing a meal for us this evening. Again Bishop Flavin said that we might get distracted in our prayer and wonder ... are we going to have pumpkin pie this evening for supper? He encouraged us to gently refocus ourselves by praying something like: Jesus, I am sorry that my mind is distracted by pumpkin pie, and I want to move on to prayers of intercession.

Supplication (Petition) ... Jesus, I ask You to give Your grace to our Holy Father and all Bishops in the Church. Help them lead us closer to You. I ask You to give Your grace to our President, our Governor, our legislators, those Judges in our Court System, and all those in public office that they seek the common good. Jesus, please give us favorable weather for the harvest season, and keep all our farmers and ranchers safe. Jesus, be with the Administration of the Seminary as they form our young men to be holy and faithful Priests. Jesus, help our seminarians to radiate Your love to all those that they meet. Finally, Jesus, bless me and all our seminarians with Your grace to experience Your love through others, and to be faithful to all that You want us to do.

Finally, Bishop Flavin concluded his prayer by saying: Lord Jesus, I praise and adore You, I am sorry for my sins, I thank You for all of your gifts and graces, and I pray for the needs of all persons.

That experience of being led in a personal prayer to Jesus by Bishop Flavin has shaped how I pray. Often after I receive our Lord in Holy Communion, I will pray my ACTS of prayer quietly in my heart. At that time, the entire Jesus, His Risen Body, Blood, Soul, and His Divinity are inside me in my stomach and in a real physical and spiritual way, He is united to me. As someone once said: *"It doesn't get much more 'personal' than receiving Jesus into our mouths and bellies."* Thus, after receiving Holy Communion is a great time to enter into a personal encounter and conversation with Jesus.

Another important time of growth in my relationship with Jesus happened after I had been in the Seminary for a year. There was one day that I needed to drive one of the Faculty members to the Airport to catch a plane during the time that Mass was scheduled for the Seminarians. I wanted to participate in Mass, and so I asked one of the Priests in the Seminary (*I'll call him, Fr. Tom*) if he was going to be praying a Mass at another time that day. Fr. Tom invited me to come to the Mass he was praying earlier in the day. When I got to the little Chapel where Fr. Tom was going to pray the Mass, I realized that I was the only person in the “congregation”. Thus, I was responsible for praying the prayers that the congregation prayed during the Mass, particularly the prayers which were in dialogue with the Priest. I had prayed those prayers as a Catholic since I was old enough to be able to pray prayers. However, in this situation, all of a sudden, I realized that I did not know the prayers or remember the words of the prayers. I had just been in a sense “following along” with others as they prayed the prayers at Mass. That experience helped me to reflect on what prayers I was praying and why I was praying those prayers or those words.

A year or so later, during the summer, a couple of seminarians and I took a trip to spend a few days with Fr. Tom. During daily Mass the three of us seminarians were the “congregation” as Fr. Tom was prayed Mass for us. Because I was close to the Altar, I began observing Fr. Tom closely. I noticed that during the prayer that the Priest prays right before the Sign of Peace, that Fr. Tom was looking down at the Consecrated Host. He was focused on the host and not looking at any of the seminarians. I thought about the words that Fr. Tom was praying: *“Lord Jesus Christ, who said to your Apostles: Peace I leave you, my peace I give you; look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church, and graciously grant her peace and unity in accordance with your will.”* It occurred to me that Fr. Tom was looking at the Consecrated Host ... at Jesus ... as he was speaking these words which were addressed to Jesus. He was not just praying words. He was speaking to Jesus. We were able to, in a sense, “listen in” on his conversation with Jesus.

During the next few days, it occurred to me that Fr. Tom was in a Religious Community and was not a Diocesan Priest, and thus there were many days that he prayed a “private Mass” with no one in the congregation. I recognized that Fr. Tom was “praying” the Mass ... not just “saying” Mass. He was in a deep personal relationship with Jesus, the eternal High Priest, as he was praying to God the Father. That experience ... that personal encounter with Jesus at Mass, changed the way that I prayed at Mass while I was a seminarian and especially since I have been a Priest.

In addition to the Prayer of the Mass, another important encounter with Christ happened the next year in the Theology Seminary near the end of a week-long Retreat. I was visiting with my Spiritual Director and telling him how much I enjoyed the time of being on Retreat. He asked me to explain more what it was that I enjoyed so much. I told him that the Masses prayed by the Retreat Master and the talks given by the Retreat Master were very prayerful and beautiful. I observed that the Masses I was able to participate in each day during the school year were always good, and the classes were helping me to grow in my knowledge of the Faith. What made the time of Retreat so good, was the opportunity to just take some long walks around the grounds of the Seminary, and to pray and reflect on Scripture, on the Retreat talks, and on my life. I very much enjoyed those walks and the quiet time. My Spiritual Director asked me what would prevent me from taking a walk every day or every evening? That thought had never occurred to me before. Yes, I prayed every day. I went to the Chapel each day and prayed, but I had never taken prayerful walks on a regular basis.

After my Spiritual Director’s suggestion, I started to take a walk every evening. At the end of the evening when I was finished with my studies, I would begin by moving to another chair in my

room. I would prayerfully read the Scriptures for the Mass the next day. Then I could go on a walk around the Seminary grounds. As I walked, I would think about the Scriptures that I had just read. I would think about the events of the day, and what I had studied or the conversations that I was involved in that day. It was a very slow, steady walk ... not a race ... not for exercise ... but for prayer. The walk would always end in the Chapel where I would spend time with our Eucharistic Lord. I would praise Him and thank Him for the events of the day and for the ways that I had encountered Him that day and would frequently pray the ACTS of prayer.

Another personal encounter with Jesus that significantly affected me happened the next year. I had been going to Confession on a monthly basis for over a year to a Priest who was a very holy, humble man (*I call him Fr. John*). One day there were some big things that I was struggling with and I knew I needed to go to Confession. I went to confession to Fr. John. I sat in a chair across from him and went to confession “face to face”. After I had poured out my heart to Fr. John and confessed all the things that I needed to confess, I looked at him and I asked: “And what must you think of me now?”

Without any pause, Fr. John looked at me and said “*I see a young man who doesn’t like the things that he has confessed and who wants to be better. That is what I am going to think of you when I see you.*” That made such a difference in my life. I had already experienced the Lord’s forgiveness in the Sacrament of Confession many times in my life. This time I was clearly aware that I had just had a very personal encounter with Jesus through the ministry of Fr. John in Sacrament of Confession.

I continued to go to Confession every month to Fr. John. By God’s grace, two years later, I was assigned as the Deacon at Fr. John’s Parish for two days a week while I was still in the Seminary. He was my “Boss” on Sundays and Thursdays, and I continued to go to confession to him on a monthly basis, because I continued to encounter Jesus through Fr. John in the Sacrament of Confession. That encounter with Jesus has continued to affect me as a Penitent (*the person going to Confession*) and also as a Priest hearing the Confessions of penitents who come to me in the Sacrament of Confession.

Another very important encounter with Jesus occurred after being Ordained a Priest and the next day celebrating my First Mass in the Parish Church where I had prayed for years with my family. I had heard the words of Consecration all of my life as I had participated in Mass. Now by God’s grace which had been given to me in the Sacrament of Holy Orders, I was not hearing those words, I was speaking those words. I was speaking those words in the first person, and I was being called to live my life as another Christ. As St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians: “*yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me.*” The prayer of the Mass was then, and continues to be an amazing encounter with Jesus.

A few weeks after my First Mass, I arrived at the Parish to which I was assigned as an Assistant Priest. In addition to encountering Christ in the Sacraments as the celebrant of the Sacraments, I was also able to encounter Christ through my Pastor and other Priests who were teaching with me in the local Catholic School and also in the Parishioners. One parishioner in particular (*I’ll call him Joe*) had a lasting effect on me. I taught some of his children in school and he and his wife were involved in the Parish and they invited over to their home for a few meals over the two years that I was in that Parish. I became aware of Joe’s deep faith. After about six months in the Parish, Joe invited me to live a Cursillo Weekend.



I knew a little about Cursillo. When I was a Sophomore in High School, my Dad and Mom had each lived a Cursillo Weekend. I saw a change in them. Because we were living on the farm 23 miles away from Lincoln, they weren't able to participate in very many Fourth Day events, but Cursillo had made a difference in their lives.

Even though I knew a little about Cursillo and saw the good effects from Cursillo, when Joe asked me, I always found an excuse or a reason to say No. I was busy teaching in the Catholic School, preparing couples for marriage, working on this project in the Parish, etc. I enjoyed being around Joe, but in a sense I avoided Joe's invitation to Cursillo for the next year and a half. Then I was assigned to another Parish. A neighboring Pastor (*I'll call him Fr. Paul*) was good friends with my new Pastor, and was the Spiritual Advisor for Cursillo in the Diocese. One day, Fr. Paul was eating lunch with my Pastor and me. Fr. Paul said that he had visited with Joe at a Cursillo meeting recently and that Joe had asked him to invite me to live a Cursillo Weekend.

My response to Fr. Paul was "*Joe has been inviting me to Cursillo for 1 ½ years.*" Then I looked at Fr. Paul and my Pastor (who was also a Cursillista) and I asked them: "What is this Cursillo anyhow, and why should I go?" My Pastor said: "*Cursillo is not a passing thing. It has a profound effect on a person's life. As you move from Parish to Parish and you look around at the people who are really involved in the Parish, you will notice that a lot of them are Cursillistas. If you want to go on this upcoming Cursillo Weekend, I'll get you coverage so that you can be on the Weekend.*" This was a good explanation and an invitation, and no arm twisting. So, I said Yes.

I lived my Cursillo Weekend in March of 1987. It was another Encounter with Christ. Sometimes I explain to people that it is so exciting to me to hear laymen talk about their Faith and how they are practically living their Faith. I had not experienced that before. In the first weeks after my Weekend, I began grouping with a group of men in the parish where I was assigned. I met weekly with my Group Reunion, and found it a great help to my spiritual life, until I was transferred to another parish.

There were not any cursillistas in the new parish to which I was assigned, and thus I did not meet in a Group Reunion for three years. I was transferred to another parish, and after six months, men from that parish lived a Cursillo Weekend and I began meeting weekly in a Group Reunion for the next 2 ½ years. Again, I found meeting with the other men a great help to my spiritual life. I was transferred to another parish, and after a few months began meeting with a group of men in a Group Reunion. I have continued to meet in a weekly Group Reunion which plays a vital part in my spiritual life and my personal relationship with Jesus.

However, it is important to notice that though I found meeting in a weekly Group Reunion important for the first year, when there were not any cursillistas in the Parish or nearby in the area to which I was moved, I did not work very hard to find other men to meet with in a Group Reunion, and I did not meet in a Group Reunion for three years. I just got busy on other things.

Another important aspect of my involvement in Cursillo, is that only five months after I lived my Three Day Weekend, I was asked by another Priest to assist him in working on the Rollo Team for a Three Day Weekend, which helped me to better understand the Three Day Weekend that I had experienced. It also helped me to understand the Cursillo Movement ... at least the Three-Day Weekend phase. Over the years, I have helped on the Rollo Team or Service Team on many of the Weekends in our Diocese.

However, as I look back over the years that I have been involved in Cursillo, I notice that for the first seven years as a cursillista I only grouped for half of those years, and yet I continued to work on Rollo Teams. After being a cursillista for 7 years, I was appointed by our Bishop as the Spiritual Advisor for our Diocesan Cursillo Movement.

For the next 7 years, the main focus of Cursillo in our Diocese was planning and holding Three Day Weekends. I don't remember much being discussed about the Precursillo or Postcursillo phases. There was an attempt to have School of Leaders (SOL) for about a year. However, SOL was not very strong or well understood, and because there was an attempt to schedule the SOL either before or after the monthly Ultreyas, the SOL and the Ultreyas both became less viable, and floundered. However, we continued to plan and schedule Three Day Weekends.

After being a Cursillista for 14 years, working on many Three-Day Weekends, and meeting only about three-fourths of those years in Group Reunions, I was asked by a cursillista who moved into our Diocese to attend a Cursillo Regional Encounter. I remember asking "*why would I want to do that?*" The cursillista responded that it was important to understand all of the phases of the Cursillo Movement and not just the Three-Day Weekend phase. It was also important to learn how Cursillo was working in other areas of the world. I reluctantly went to my first Regional Encounter mainly because the cursillista who asked me was a friend ... the importance of friendship! Since then, I have been participating in Regional Encounters (two times a year) and a National Encounter every year but one.

In addition to participating in the Regional and National Encounters, I started to meet and study with Cursillo friends, and after a few years we re-started the SOL's in our Diocese. I remembered hearing in one of the Rollos on the Three-Day Weekend, "*An isolated Christian is a paralyzed Christian*" and "*An isolated Group Reunion is a paralyzed Group Reunion.*" When I heard those lines on the Weekends, I am pretty sure that I did not understand them. After years of not meeting in a Group Reunion followed by years of study of the Cursillo Movement, I can better recognize that if a cursillista does not meet in a Group Reunion, they are not going to grow as much as if they did meet regularly in a Group Reunion. Similarly, if the members of a Group Reunion do not participate in a monthly Ultreya (with other cursillistas outside of their regular Group Reunion), they will not grow as much as if they participate in Ultreya.

I have found that meeting with other persons, especially cursillistas is a very important way to encourage others in their personal relationship with Jesus and to be encouraged by them in my personal relationship with Jesus. Perhaps, it was another cursillista who had the greatest effect or influence on my deepening my personal relationship with Jesus. This cursillista invited me to read some Catholic books together and discuss them. I had never been a very good reader. This motivated me to grow in the 2<sup>nd</sup> leg of the tripod ... study. There was now another person who was going to hold me more accountable to Study than any of the persons in my Group Reunions had ever done.

Through this Study and especially through our discussions about what we were reading, I grew in my knowledge of our Faith, my knowledge of Cursillo, and a lived experience of what it meant to be loved by another person. I knew intellectually that I was loved by God, but I had never really experienced this love through friendship with another person.

We talked about Jesus' love for us, and through prayer and study we found many different persons throughout the Scriptures and the history of the Church who were friends. These saints who were friends encouraged and challenged each other in their growth in holiness. Some of them

were Priests, some Sisters, some laity ... saints like: St. Benedict & St. Scholastica; St. John of the Cross & St. Theresa of Avila; St. Catherine of Siena & St. Raymond of Capua; St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory Nazianzen; St. Francis & St. Clare; St. Francis de Sales & St. Jane Frances de Chantal; St. Terese & Maurice; St. Augustine & St. Monica.

My prayer for you and encouragement to you, is to remember that Jesus loves you and to experience Jesus' love for you through your friends. Spend time with your friends encouraging each other to continue to grow in your personal relationship with Jesus. Above all, spend time in what Matthew Kelly calls "*the classroom of silence.*" Make a commitment to spend time each with Jesus present in the Blessed Sacrament. Enter into a deep personal conversation with Jesus. Perhaps you might pray your own ACTS of prayers. Also remember to listen to Jesus. Don't just pray prayers ... but PRAY. As the two disciples on the road to Emmaus did, invite Jesus to stay with you. Invite Jesus to be with you during your day. Enter into a personal dialogue with your Best Friend (Jesus)!