

The Grace of Emptiness **A Preparatory Session for St. Ignatius Day 2012**

Theme: A pivotal point in our spiritual journey is the moment when we come face-to-face with the emptiness in our heart that can only be filled by God.

Materials: Bible, music of “Ang Kaluluwa Ko’y Nauuhaw,”¹ music of “In Him Alone”²

Opening prayer (Grace to pray for): My soul yearns for you in the night, my spirit within me earnestly seeks you (Is 26:9a). Loving God, may we always be aware that we are empty and powerless without you and totally dependent on you. *Listen to/sing “Ang Kaluluwa Ko’y Nauuhaw.”*

First Reading: Ignatius and Emptiness

Ignatius described himself at the age of twenty-six as being proud, ambitious, and violent. Juan de Polanco, his secretary, added this about Ignatius as a young man: “Although much attached to the faith, he did not live in accordance with his belief, and he did not keep himself from sin. He was especially out of order in regard to gambling, matters pertaining to women, and dueling.”³

Then, at Pamplona, a cannonball shattered Ignatius’s legs. During his long, excruciating convalescence, Ignatius underwent a change of heart, realizing the emptiness of his former life. In his Autobiography, Ignatius said:

Our Lord assisted [Ignatius], causing other thoughts that arose from the things he read... While reading the life of Our Lord and of the saints, he stopped to think, reasoning with himself, “What if I should do what St. Francis did, what St. Dominic did?” So he pondered over many things that he found to be good, always proposing to himself what was difficult and serious, and as he proposed them, they seemed to him easy to accomplish... These thoughts also lasted a good while, but when other matters intervened... worldly thought... returned, and he also spent much time on them.

Yet there was this difference. When he was thinking about the things of the world, he took much delight in them, but afterwards, when he was tired and put them aside, he found that he was dry and discontented. But when he thought of going to Jerusalem, barefoot and eating nothing but herbs and undergoing all the other rigors that he saw the saints had endured, not only was he consoled when he had these thoughts, but even after putting them aside, he remained content and happy... One time his eyes were opened a little, and he began to marvel at the difference and to reflect upon it, realizing from experience that

¹ Danny Isidro, S.J. and Nemy Que, S.J., “Ang Kaluluwa Ko’y Nauuhaw,” *Huwag Mangamba - Mga Awit ng Pagtatagpo* (Quezon City: Jesuit Music Ministry of the Jesuit Communications Foundation, 2002)

² Manoling Francisco, S.J., “In Him Alone,” *Stand by Me Still – Songs for Healing* (Quezon City: Jesuit Music Ministry of the Jesuit Communications Foundation, 2006).

³ Joseph de Guibert, *The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice*, p. 23.

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some thoughts left him sad and others happy. Little by little he came to recognize the difference between the spirits that agitated him, one from the demon, the other from God.⁴

Reflection questions: Ask yourselves, “Have you ever felt this kind of emptiness or joylessness that can only be filled by God? In what ways is emptiness a grace?”

Group sharing on the reflection questions (optional)

Second Reading: Psalm 63:1

God, you are my God, I pine for you;
my heart thirsts for you,
my body longs for you,
as a land parched, dreary and waterless.

Reflection

Ignatius’s experience was like that of many of us who have needed to face the emptiness in our life. Ignatius drove himself toward success, recognition, and esteem. Underlying this drive was a deep hunger and inner emptiness. Neither gambling, womanizing, nor dueling filled the void within his heart. But neither did a compulsive religiosity. After his conversion, Ignatius fasted excessively and inflicted severe penances on his body. This only whetted his inner hunger.

True conversion comes when we turn to God, acknowledging that only God can fill our emptiness and that God’s love has already been poured out by Jesus. We cannot earn God’s love because Jesus gives it to us freely and constantly – if we will open ourselves to it. Ignatius needed to let go and trust God. Only then could God fill the emptiness in his heart.

Guided Prayer

Be still and silent. Sit calmly. Breathe deeply until you feel relaxed. Close your eyes. Let all the tension cease. Begin with your feet. Feel the tension go. Continue tensing and then relaxing each part of your body. Meanwhile, breathe slowly and deeply. Focus on your breathing for a while.

Imagine Ignatius trying to fill his emptiness with gambling, womanizing, and dueling. All of us have our own ways of filling the void we feel. Some people overeat; others become addicted to a TV show or a computer game. Becoming addicted to work can be a tempting way to protect ourselves from our inner longing for God. Recall your ways of hiding from the hollowness of heart that only God can fill. How do you fill the void that you feel?

Today we will try to touch our inner longings and desire for God’s fullness. Recall experiences that you have had of emptiness, the powerful sense that something was

⁴ Olin and O’Callaghan, *Autobiography*, pp. 23-24.

seriously lacking in your life, the hollow ache in your heart. Then, begin describing these experiences of emptiness and inner aching. Pour out all your feelings to God without worrying about order or grammar. Speak to God as honestly as you can. *Pause.*

Imagine that your deepest longing, the inner ache for completion and fullness, has taken your shape and is sitting in front of you. Ask your longing what she or he really desires. Listen to her or him describe the deep longing, the hollow places, the passion for fullness. *Pause.*

Where is God in that longing? Do you really find God there? How do you experience God in that longing? *Pause.*

Having found God in your longing, do you sense an invitation from Him in relation to that yearning? What is God inviting you to do with your longing?

Spend some time in conversation with the Lord about his invitation to you in terms of how to deal with your longing. Tell God how you honestly feel. Talk to him as you would a friend. And listen to what he has to say. *Pause.*

Now open your eyes. Gently pray aloud a word or phrase that expresses your longing: for example, "Come," "Light," "Jesus," or "Out of the depths, I cry to you." *After all have said their word/phrase, say:* Repeat this prayer word or phrase as a lamentation and as a call for God's fire to fill you.

Now, in the silence of your heart, declare your dependence on God.

Group sharing on the grace received during the Guided Prayer

Everyone is invited to share the grace they received during the guided prayer. The Group Guide may summarize the common points and deepen the sharing when all have shared.

Closing Prayer

Invite the members to say a short spontaneous prayer thanking the Lord for the grace they received in this session.

Lord, our God – Giver of all gifts and all creation – we praise and thank you for the grace of emptiness and for helping us recognize our utter dependence on you. We know you constantly invite us to seek and find you in all things. But sometimes we fail to recognize you in our experiences and in our longings. Move us to have the resolve to respond to your invitation to us today in prayer. May we learn to celebrate this special grace of emptiness that you offer us with a joyful heart.

Together as one community, we affirm that only in You, our God, can the emptiness in our hearts truly be filled. *End the prayer by listening or singing with the song, "In Him Alone."*