

Retreat for Seminarians St. Charles Borromeo Tuesday and Wednesday,
May 29-30, 2001 **First Presentation**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, this couple of days the theme is contemplation, which is not something you do; and I'm not even talking about the methods of contemplation, which would be contemplative prayer—John will help you with that; it's not too hard, really. The problem is people practice contemplative prayer and they never really look into the underlying implications of it. **I'll give you a short outline of the three talks.**

- ◆ First, I'm talking about the importance of spirituality for priests. Why does a priest need to have a spirituality?
- ◆ Then something about a sense of self, a deeper sense of self.
- ◆ Then thirdly, we may begin already the idea of contemplation as a vision of unity. Okay? We probably won't touch much of that this afternoon, but that's basically tomorrow morning. Now today, this afternoon, if you have questions in between, go ahead and ask them. Tomorrow morning I am going to ask you to hold your questions until the end.
- ◆ Then the fourth thing I'm going to do is we are going to discuss the category known as capital sins. Capital sins are not sins you commit. Capital sins are also ways of being, but they are ways of being dysfunctional. So the outcome of this whole idea is that contemplation is a way of living; it's a mode of being not something you do, and the opposite is being dysfunctional. And there are eight different ways of being dysfunctional: the seven capital sins and one more I added. So we're going to talk about them again, not as something you do, but as a way of being, a warp. In terms of capital sins they're a warped way of being, a warped way of perceiving reality, a warped way of perceiving oneself, and therefore a warped way of living.

Part One: Forming a Personal Theology

Now first of all, spirituality really begins from a personal theology. Now when you are in seminary you're taught, for example, dogmatic theology. What is really dogmatic theology? It's a study of how the Church's belief grew and developed over a long period of time—the Church's belief. And what are the basic themes of dogmatic theology? Basically, the teachings of the Creed and the teachings of various Councils and popes which have followed—that simply developed our basic understand of who is Christ, who is God, what is the meaning of the incarnation, what is the incarnation, who are we as Church, those kinds of questions—that's dogma; and it is a collective type of process. But it's very important that in addition to having some sort of dogmatic theology, that you have your own personal theology. It is not enough for you simply to rely on the Church. And that's partially due to the fact that we live in a period of time in which that really won't sell. But it has never been adequate to leave theological thinking to others, learning theology in a passive way.

The Vatican Council said that the Church must be alert to the signs of the times. The signs of our times are, number one, skepticism. So if you come across—and you may be a really very fine dogmatic theologian, and you may really know your stuff and present it very well, but basically this will not be a door into the hearts of most people! Not now! Along the way it may, when they start to realize their need for development and so on, but it can't be the entrée. The entrée has got to be you! This is a time when living witness is the most important kind of witness. So you have to have your own personal theology—that means a personal faith understanding.

And then that faith understanding has to be verified, because the other sign of the times is the great importance given to science. In fact, some believe too much authority is given to science by modern culture. But what is it about science that brings about a certain sense of authority or reliability? I believe it's that science, at least correctly understood, scientific principles are verifiable by more than one person. They are verifiable by many different people following the same method. So that's really what makes the scientific theory a good theory, and that's what brings it into acceptance. It's that experiments are set up that other people can copy.

Well, in a similar way, what you need to do as a priest is to present a personal understanding of God, a personal understanding of the Spirit, a personal understanding of who Jesus is, that works for you, but present it in such a way that it will work for them too—not without modification, of course. But you have to be speaking from experience, and spirituality is the experience. Spirituality is your having verified that this understanding of God really is real, so that you can really talk to people from truly in your heart and in your mind at the same time, and not simply be reflecting what someone else taught you, because that's one thing that won't work today!

Now you remember on Monday the liturgy was this section where the disciples say to Jesus, "You know, we now believe. We know who you are and no one has any need to ask any more questions." And Jesus' response to that is, "Oh, do you really believe?" The reason for that strange question, it seems like an anomaly, but there's a good reason for it because when we are at a stage when we don't have anymore questions—and we will have that stage at different times in our lives where faith is easy, where God seems very evident, where there is really no struggle. In that stage of life there's actually a hidden danger because when we believe everything, then we maybe really believe nothing because we've never discriminated.

Now there was a time, and maybe your parents are part of this time, maybe your grandparents or great-grandparents, when ordinary lay people never asked any questions. They just grew up. The priest said this and they believed it, and that was it! But actually what did they believe? They believed something maybe, you know, but it would be very hard to pin down. Well, that kind of faith today won't sell! Evangelizing is a selling of the faith. And we are involved in making the truth of Christ somehow desirable, available, and attractive. Read Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, one of the most important documents in the post-Vatican II period. That is the work of the Church, and it's really everyone's work. But as leaders, and I presume every priest is a leader of the people, you

have to be able to do it yourself so you can show other people how they can do it. So that's the first point that you have to have a personal theology and a personal spirituality.

And there are dozens of spiritualities. And it's not a matter of method. You can find methods—try them all. Try whatever you like. That's not the point. The point is you have to be doing something. You have to be checking in on a regular basis with the Spirit within you, and you have to be making decisions through the Spirit. If the Spirit—if Jesus—you know, he always talks about sending the Paraclete. And he says, “The Father will send the Paraclete,” and “I will send the Paraclete”—if it weren't for that, the Church would not still exist today. But the same is true for the life of the individual priest. If the priest does not keep his mind constantly returning to the depth of the Spirit within him, then he will be lost. And priests do get lost. They get lost; they give up, and then they don't finish the race. And that was this morning's reading. St. Paul talked about finishing the race—not winning the race—finishing the race—just staying in to the end; that's the basic point. And that is absolutely essential that we have some sort of practical way of letting the Spirit guide and direct us in life, and that's a spirituality.

Part Two: A Deeper Sense of Self

Now the second part I'd like to talk about is a deeper sense of self. Thomas Merton, and almost every author in the subject of spirituality, distinguishes at least two different sides of oneself. As St. Teresa of Avila says, “You can't grow in knowledge of God without growing in knowledge of yourself.” Well, what Merton points out, and many others, is that there is a sense of self that is totally false. It's called the “false self.” There are other terms too, but we'll use this word. It's the false self and the true self. What's the difference? The false self is the product of your own life and experience—but it's false. That means you're born in a particular family, and you are either cared for very well or not so well. You have all kinds of experiences positive and negative, and you gradually learn. Through learned experience you learn who you are to other people.

Now you were very fortunate if your parents were the kind of people who really wanted to have children around. That's fortunate; you didn't create that. And if you had a deep sense of being loved, that's really wonderful; but it isn't your fault nor is it your doing. It's the fact that you had parents who really wanted children. But if you had the other experience, being born into a family where you weren't wanted, again you probably have a very negative image of self; but that isn't your fault either. These are both sides of the false self; they're products of life. The true self is something else. No one can know the true self initially; in fact, it's a mystery that we learn and grow into.

And one way to think of it would be to look at it in terms of a triangle. The human being is equipped with, as you know, what St. Thomas called the “tabula rasa,” the blank tablet. That means we're born without a mind, not without the capacity for mind, but without a mind. We have a brain, but no mind. Okay? Is this good or bad? I will not say. But we're born without a mind. They have discovered children have one thing—one instinctive thing—the capacity to perceive a face; that every child will react to a face, even a cardboard face. It's pretty weird, but that's true. So it's not a totally rasa tabula.

It's got one thing on it—a face. Now think about that as a mystery that no one can understand, but it's great. Children start to learn about themselves through their toes and things around them.

Now children at first don't perceive visual objects the way we do. Actually we learn how to perceive visual objects. The reason we know that is through recent laser surgery on people born blind; and when their blindness was healed through laser surgery, then that was studied—how they came to perceive light. And they didn't perceive objects at all for quite awhile, so they had to learn how to perceive objects. That's all learned. And also it was interesting that some of these people really hated the experience. They hated it because it was painful; and sometimes, new experiences are painful. When they did start to look at themselves in a mirror it was sometimes terribly shocking to them because almost all of them had imagined themselves being much more attractive than they really were. And that says something about the false self. The world of imagination is powerful.

I don't know about you, but actually I remember an experience when I was going to school—and I don't know how old I was, but it was grade school, and I was quite young—but I remember looking in the mirror one day and realizing that I had never actually seen myself. I'd actually never seen myself. I had a different picture of what I looked like. And all of a sudden I looked at myself and was, well, a bit shocked I think. Now what was I dreaming about? I have no idea. I have no memory of what it was, but I remember the experience of actually being, I would say, rather saddened, as I recall, at seeing myself at this particular moment. Now I can't explain why it happened, but I know it did; and there are others who have these experiences.

And by this bottom line I will represent a sense of self that is locked to the physical, the physical world. Not necessarily just the body or the face, but also what one grows up with because children, for example, who grow up—if you have balloons around, they will identify with the balloons or hanging objects or whatever, blankets, playpens. If you think about it, in your own mind what is your earliest memory? My earliest memory is the knotty pine on the door of my parent's bedroom; that's my earliest memory. It is very early. It's from three years old or two and a half. That's actually quite early for a memory. But I know it had to be because I remember it, and my parents verified that they did have a knotty pine door with an iron latch. And I could tell them about this, but I haven't been there since I was, let's see 1951, so I was barely two years old, actually. We moved out of there and never went back. So they verified that's what it looked like, and I remember it. And normally lots of psychologists say it's impossible, but it's true; I did remember it!

That's this line. Now some people actually live their entire lives on that line. That is they identify with it—you can say it's the line of the material. They are nothing other than a material self; that is what they think of. When they think of themselves, they think of their bodies, their money, what they possess, their homes, their cars, their boats, their jobs. That's what they think of; that's who they are. They don't have any more idea of who they are. And I don't know that you're going to meet many of these people in the

parish—probably not—but you might. They do exist. They're pretty pathetic. They're often very successful, however, believe it or not—very successful in life because they put all their eggs in that one basket; and they work their tails off to become, you know, something good in that little material world. But beyond that there's nothing but chaos. That is, they have potential within them; they have souls too, but their souls are chaotic, unformed. Okay.

Now human beings share with all mammals a rather rich sensitivity; actually we share a sensitivity with all living forms, but with mammals a rich sensitivity! That is, it's enriched by the rather elaborate brain that has been developed that all mammals have. I don't know if you ever studied brains, but there are three levels of brains in a human being. The first is the spinal cord itself, which is almost identical to that of an alligator, a reptile, even in human beings it's really not changed much. And the next part the mesencephalon, the midbrain, and the limbic system kind of are added onto that in the center of the brain, you know. And we share that with the big mammals, but even cats and dogs, which are small mammals, have something like that. So there is this developing, evolving sensitivity which gives us emotions. And emotions then permeate everything human beings do and all of their experience. And it represents actually a level of selfhood. You know, people can become identified with how they feel, so who they are, are their feelings, if you really ask them. All right. You could call it their reactions, or something like that, or their emotions. You see this analysis really comes to us from the Sufis.

And one of the things I've done is I've studied spirituality from around the world, and I borrow wherever I can borrow. Now there are things that some spiritualities hold that are incompatible with our faith; but I believe as Aquinas did that our faith is reasonable, so we can borrow everything we want to from other philosophies. The Fathers of the Church talked about despoiling the pagans, so I've despoiled the pagans too and borrowed this analysis of selfhood. It's much more profound than you find in analytic psychology, Jung or Freud, or any of them. This is much more profound, and it's really true, too.

Again, on this level of reactions, some people spend an awful lot of time in this reaction area, this area of just emoting. And when that's really the center of who they are, it's very unhealthy. And there's many people who can't seem to get beyond this part, and we don't know exactly why. Some people think it's chemical imbalances in the brain, and so now psychiatry is really almost exclusively involved with trying to regulate brain chemistry, trying to help people to get beyond just a reactive, emotional life. It is good if people suffering from manic depressive problems realize that with such symptoms if they don't go to the doctor and don't take the prescribed medication and don't pray, they'd go crazy! And it's a good insight because manic depression isn't craziness. Manic depression is a symptom. It's a disorder that causes discomfort. See? But it's not being crazy. But if you don't deal with it, then you will be crazy. So we have to think perhaps a new way about a lot of these things. You don't get crazy from birth. You get crazy from not knowing what to do or not having anyone to support you in your efforts to find health. Okay.

The Reactional self, the Intellect, the True Self

So some people then live their entire life as a reactional self, and I think if you look at the world of today, if you look in the newspaper—no, it was in the Economist—and there's a picture of this crazed man, you know, that was ready to blow up somebody over in Palestine, and they're talking about the influence of religion. Well, you know, it's not really religion; it's the reactive self! And people identify with that, and then within that context they take on religious affections. It's pretty dangerous—it's very dangerous. That's a level of selfhood.

Okay then, beyond that, of course, we also have, and especially a human being has, which no other animal has, an intellect—an intellect. And an intellect is a powerful instrument, and modern neuroscience does not know how the intellect works. We know that we have one. We know that the brain has something to do with it, but we don't really know what. In other words, we know all kinds of things about perception, but we don't really know, well, now how does that become an experience of thought? How do you really get to understand anything? It's still a mystery; maybe it always will be—I don't know. But then you have to remember this, if the brain were so simple that we could understand it, we'd be so simple we couldn't! So this is the level of the mind or the intellect—and this is for a lot of people too about as high as they go in their development of self. So they have a selfhood that is located really in their mind, in their intellect. And this is often perplexing—I'll say that.

People who operate on this level are often very bright, and yet they're also very confused. Why? Because the mind, the intellect, by itself, alone, reason alone, cannot answer the real issues of life. And I personally think that the real issues of life only come with a goal, with a purpose. So believers are often exasperated with unbelievers. They say, "Well, can't they see how beautiful everything is, can't they see how complex life is and how complex the brain is, and how the fetus grows? Aren't they filled with awe and wonder at all this?" Well, yeah, they are—sure—but that doesn't give any meaning because it all dies. People die. Plants die. Planets die. Suns die. Stars die. The whole universe will eventually die—therefore, no meaning! And reason does not ever go beyond that. Reason—although some say that it is reasonable to assume the human soul will last forever, I do not consider that particularly reasonable by today's standards. It's not against reason, but reason will not convince anybody—and hasn't! People who believe in immortality have faith, and that means they've gone beyond this level of mind alone.

So here at this point now, this little area here, we can call that the true self. And we'd have to say that the true self is not something we are really and truly conscious of because our consciousness starts here and then descends—you could think that this is upside down—it descends into our emotions and then into our mind, and then when we get into the center of the soul, we're no longer really conscious of it—although we may have moments of being conscious of it. All right, those are very special moments of your life, but that's not something that happens all the time—nor do you want it to. But even though it's not totally conscious it is possible—and it is absolutely necessary, and it's

part of every formation program in one way or another—to deal with bringing people into the center of their souls, and allowing that to be truly the center also of their sense of self. So, then, we'd say the true self is the center of the soul and a really healthy life; that is a spiritually healthy life would be a life in which the soul is the center of the self, where that is a conscious reference, where you consciously refer to something deep in yourself and recognize that as more important than anything that is really conscious, anything mental or emotional or material within yourself.

Now if you think about it for awhile, you'll realize that when you are in prayer, this is really possible. But if you neglect prayer, if you ignore prayer, actually you will almost immediately be reverting back to these levels [of the physical and material, emotional or reactive, and intellectual]. And it's possible for priests, even though they are ordained and given the grace of the sacraments—and of course they have Baptism and Eucharist and everything else—they can nonetheless revert to rather primitive levels of understanding and also rather self-centered ways of living.

Now the true self's boundaries—and here we have to deal with the topic of boundaries. You know, what is a boundary? Well, it's pretty hard to say what a boundary is. Well, let's put it this way, in a child the child has a boundary—pretty obvious and small boundary. A child knows what is and what isn't his or hers. And if you take a toy from a child, that can cause a crisis because that child identifies with that toy. So the child has a sense of who he or she is and it's more or less determined by the material world around him or her—reactions a little bit harder to see, but also a small world. And people who live in the reactive state have small, petty emotions and they're preoccupied with their own likes and dislikes; and they allow their likes and dislikes to motivate their decisions, which is why we call it a “reactive self.”

But after all, we do know that we are all individuals; and I am not John, and I'm not Francis, and I'm not Frank. We do know that about ourselves: we have identities! Now in Eastern mysticism this whole idea of identity is almost totally abolished, as if it is just part of this preposterous delusion down here. But it isn't really preposterous. It's actually part of the mystery of God, that God actually created each of us as individuals and that we have been in the mind of God for all eternity as individuals. From before we were begotten, God knew us. God says that to Jeremiah. Well, it's true for everybody! And that itself is quite a mystery too, how that could be. You could say the idea of who we are is eternal because God's mind is eternal. But we're not eternal, in our present condition anyway.

So the self and the idea of boundaries—boundaries in unhealthy people are very rigid, and the more spiritual a person becomes, the more flexible boundaries are; and they have to be. If you think about St. Paul talking about the mystical body, he is trying to get people beyond the level of boundaries. He wants people to think of themselves as all belonging to one body. So he says, “Do you not realize that you who have been baptized have died and now you live a new life?” The “you” is plural; the “life” is singular! So he is trying to talk about something that really has to go on in the depths of the soul where the singularity, the uniqueness of each individual, while being maintained, nonetheless is

not maintained separately from everything else. So he talks about the body of Christ. We're all members. That is, every single self is a member of a body; and the body has to be the center of our growing spiritual awareness. Another wonderful image is the vine and the branches. So every single person, every true self is truly a branch, but a branch is just a branch—it's not a vine. The vine is something bigger.

Now it is actually possible—the Sufis point this out—that on the level of the true self actually you could become totally self-centered on the level of the true self—totally egotistical. And some do. In fact, the Sufi theory is that the great rulers in the history of the world, the people who really had control over other people, like Genghis Khan and other people, that actually they had developed a very powerful true self, but they were not open to God; they were not really open to the Spirit, and their boundaries were shut, closed. We don't need to go into that. But the idea of boundaries—when people take certain forms of drugs their sense of boundaries can come completely relaxed and it can even disappear. But that is normally considered a rather unhealthy way to go about perceiving this need for flexibility. So as we grow and develop spiritually, we have to understand ourselves differently.

In Buddhism there's talk about the true self as no-self. That's a Buddhist paradox. But that's because they define the self as a sense of separation. Well, if that's really the case, if the self is a sense of separation, then the goal is no self because we're to be members of one body, we're to be branches on the vine. The only problem with that language is it's not compatible with our culture. So if we're going to use no-self language, it doesn't work in English, in the Western world. So I don't use it except just right now to bring it up. But I would regard true self as a valid concept for us to develop.

Now heaven is, in our view, a communion of saints with God; and this is a mystical communion, and the union begins now. That's the meaning of our sacraments. Baptism—St. Paul says, “Do you not know when you were baptized you died?” Okay, so any real sense of separation died. Sometimes St. Paul uses the word the “old self.” He means a sense of self that is down here; this would be the old self. He says that dies. In fact he even says it's “crucified.” Sometimes the passing of the old self is rather painful because people don't want to let go, but actually there's no reason it should be painful. The sacrament of reality, of Baptism, leads to a contemplative vision of life, so if we understood Baptism, we'd all be contemplative. Contemplation is not something we do; it is the vision that is derived from Baptism—and Eucharist, because Eucharist is also derived from the vision of Baptism. So we want to think about what is contemplation and what is the vision of contemplation? It is understanding the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist and Confirmation.

Now human perceptions are frail and partial. We grow in a frail, partial way in life. Even Jesus apparently did. He learned obedience through what he suffered. He learned as a human being would learn. He doubtlessly had a very special relation with the Father, and knew about it very early on in life. But that doesn't mean that he was walking around actually knowing everything that was going to happen. No, he grew in age and

wisdom before God and man; and I think the Bible means, and I think the evangelists are trying to say, that he grew up normally, like a normal human being.

The truth depends on reason and revelation. It is my contention that—well, I think everyone would agree here in this room—that reason alone cannot bring us the fullness of truth. And if people pursue that, they are pursuing a goal that is going to leave them utterly frustrated. But reason is still important. I think we have to avoid totally fideism, which is very common today, especially among evangelicals. Fideism means you accept truth, period! This is what the Bible says—you believe it! Don't think about it. Don't try to figure it out. Don't even try to connect it to something else—just believe it! No, the purpose of our having reason is that we can actually fit everything together. Because why? The truth is one.

Questions

So now at this point do you have any questions? Can you understand what I am saying?

- ◆ Question: How would you differentiate what you are talking about here, this descending true self—how would you differentiate that from a rejection of things material and therefore sacramental?

No, you are rejecting identifying with them—so they are not you. I realize it's a little subtle. You have to think about how people actually think of their possessions as being part of them—and some people more than others. And some characters are more prone to that. It actually is related to the sin of greed, which I'll get to in the third section.

- ◆ Question: So you are saying you are not only your body?
Your body is part of who you are, but it's not who you are.
- ◆ Question: It's not an outright rejection of yourself?
No, not in our faith, because our faith is incarnational.

- ◆ Question: What can we identify when we are on that plateau of true self? Are we relating to being made in the image of God? What are we relating to on that, that we can identify ourselves if we are on the right path, on the right level?

I use the idea of the branch and the vine and the member and the body. Those are two images I use. The image of God, of course, is perfectly valid too. I mean there's lots of ways you can relate. Another Christ! Or to see yourself as in Christ and part of Christ in a true sense. That's what St. Paul was trying to get at in all the different ways he used. So I mean it's always something that's hard to put into language, because language is really based on this [physical] part of reality—not even this [intellectual]. And mind you, it's very natural for every single person, including Christ, to have gone through these processes, these stages. The problem is people get stuck, and they get stuck because of, basically, original sin, and how they bring original sin into their own lives. And that “stuckness” is something you will see in your pastoral work with people, and you will realize it's not a mental illness as much as it's a lack of spiritual growth. And I believe a lot of what people call “craziness” is a lack of spiritual growth. It's not so much the

symptom; it's what they don't do with the symptom. Or, on the other hand, another way of looking at that is that a lot of what people call "sick" today is really evil. Again, that has to do with the will—consciously or not as consciously. If people begin habits and patterns that are bad and destructive when they're very young, they get into a way of sin which doesn't mean they actually ever decide it with this great awareness of what they're doing to get into it—but they got into it.

- ◆ Question: What do we say about those people once they are into such a habit that it's something they continually do, something they don't want to do, but it's something they are so addicted to, they can't stop?

Right! That word is a perfect word, "addicted!" They become addicted. Right. And they can't stop without the grace of God.

- ◆ Question: The plateau would deal then with the supernatural where the lower level is the natural? And if that's the case, then you would expect most of the people most of their time to be in the lower levels—I should think? You know, you get stuck on materialism, your likes and dislikes, certainly fostered in the world. It would be very difficult for people to get to a higher plane, I would think?

Right! Now we believe that through grace and through Baptism, for example, that the supernatural has already been infused into people's souls if they're believers. Okay. Now here's the point of spirituality: are they aware of it? And you're bringing up the fact that no, in their daily awareness it doesn't play a role at all. No, because in their daily awareness they're taking all their cues from the world, from television, from their work, and from the culture around. That's right. That's the problem. That's a problem of living a life without spirituality. And if in all truth—I mean some of the problems of the world are due to the Church because we haven't promoted a spirituality for lay people. You know, we've had monasteries, and we've taught and told people it's great if you want to be a monk, go be a monk! But we have to teach ordinary folks who are in the work-a-day world. This is the goal of the gospel—to go into the work-a-day world and to sanctify work. Well, you can't sanctify work unless people have some consciousness of who they really are. Now if they are stuck somewhere, they're not sanctifying their work—unless you just want to now believe in magic. And that's unfortunately another thing, that some people just think, well, they throw up their hands and say, "Well, it's all in God's hands." Yes, it is, but if we are going to work as cooperators with God, we have to be conscious cooperators, not unconscious ones.

- ◆ Question: How do we make that happen?

My point of coming here and talking to you is we start with ourselves, and that if our mode of life and the way we talk and the choices we make and even the recreation that we take and everything, if that reflects this type of reality, we're doing something, leading others. Then as we teach, as we deal with communities or groups or small groups or whatever we do, we're going to be drawing people to it. But we won't draw people to it, if we don't do it ourselves—if we just throw up our hands and put everything in God's hands! Not that, of course, it isn't in God's hands—of course it all is in God's hands. So I'm talking about awareness, consciousness—that's really what contemplation is about.

Any other questions?

- ◆ Question: Are you going to draw—it could either be a parallel to the descent or ascent to an awareness of the true God or would you say that to some degree it's one and the same?

I think it's one and the same. I think that's the only thing we can believe as incarnational people. Now God comes to us; we don't go to God.

- ◆ Comment: But the characteristics of that journey, while it may be one and the same, appear different.

That's true.

- ◆ Comment: I mean in terms of—it's much easier, I think, to describe giving up false images of God than it is to give up on false images of ourselves—you know, when God doesn't live up to the expectation of what you thought God was, we either give up on God or we give up the expectation; and it's a lot easier to talk about giving up false images of God than it is to give up on false images of ourselves.

That's probably true.

- ◆ Comment: So it might be one and the same journey, but the way—
It's all interrelated though.

- ◆ Question: Well, how do you get to this awareness of consciousness of your true self? Well, it's only quarter to four! I'm going to be talking about that for the next two days, okay? So that's what we're trying to get at.

- ◆ Question: In what sense were you talking about the boundaries becoming more flexible the closer we come to our truer self? I understand that at the lower levels we hold onto this object as being yourself—more rigid.

Well, ultimately who each person is, who I am, is not something I actually can know and define. See, when you get to this level it's indefinable. And that's part of the journey, to let go of what's definable. And of course this area we're still working with what's definable, and of course it can be an area of great confusion. And it's natural. As I say, adolescents have to go through this or they never become adults. But at some point a spiritual adult has to let go and let God lead. Well, you know what happens—people like Mother Teresa, for example. We can use her for an example of a person with no boundaries. She went out into the street and she found this pathetic person, being, on the ground. She saw part of herself! She cared for that person and she acknowledged that person's dignity as equal to her own, although her society didn't! The culture around her did not. These were “throw-away people.” But she saw them and felt them to be herself. And it seems that's what Christ is saying in the Beatitudes too, that you have to come to the point of sensing him in others—see there's no boundaries—no clear boundaries. There's individuality; I'm not taking away the idea of identity, but it's in God. It's not in what we call the “real world.” Actually God is making the real world. St. Basil in today's reading—you know, from the Office of Readings—says, “And we become God.” A lot of people think that sounds strange, but his point is that God and God's ideas and God's work and heaven is the real world; and that can envelop us even now, and there is

no reason it shouldn't—except for the boundaries we've established when we won't let God in!

- ◆ Comment: I like the other phrase from that reading this morning. St. Basil defines spirituality as “the ability to be the Spirit in the world”; that's how he used that phrase, which is a different slant on that. And I was thinking there's a priest in Chicago I know who talks about the fact that his perception is that we're swimming in God. But the question is do we know we are swimming in God? Do we live as if we're swimming in God?

That's right—that's right! That's the problem! Do we know it; do we sense it? And then we have our poets and we have our mystics, who sense it for us, tell us about it; and then if we're wise, we listen! But a lot of people just forget about it. They think, well, that's the poet!

Second Section: On the Contemplative Vision: Metanoia, Reality, Ego

Beginning the second section, which is really on the contemplative vision, and it begins with an understanding of what is metanoia. Metanoia, well, that's what we say in modern-day English, actually in Greek it's “metania.” Metanoia is a word that's found in Scripture associated with Jesus' own preaching—Jesus' own preaching—not that he is preaching in Greek now, but that when the authors wrote in Greek about what Jesus really said, they all agree that he preached metanoia. What does it mean? What sort of idea do you have of it? You've heard of it, I'm sure. All right one idea is conversion. What else? Transformation. What else? Change of heart and literally change of mind—change of mind, change of heart. So this is the basic idea.

So Christ himself begins his preaching about the kingdom of God. “The kingdom of God is at hand,” he says—at hand, meaning it's at arm's length. But in order for you to grasp it, you have to be able to undergo something like this: a conversion and transformation and change of heart and mind. Again there's the image of new wine in old skins. Jesus says, “No one puts new wine in old skins.” But that is really what we do in our spiritual journey: we put new wine in old skins because we bring in the gospel. We hear the gospel; we are given the gospel; we are addressed with the truth and the revelation of Christ, and then we more or less put it into our ordinary lives the way they were before—untransformed, unchanged in every other way! Well, you can't do that! You can't add the gospel to everything else. Another little phrase: “No one puts a new patch on an old garment.” Of course, it's a lie that no one does it! Everyone does it! We all do it with our spiritual lives. We take little bits and pieces and we try to add them to what was there before. And maybe we have to work that way at first. It's part of our necessary method, but eventually we have to go through a complete change of heart.

What is really real? Now this actually gets right down into common, everyday, practical reality. What is really real? Our experienced perception of life, if we follow it as the sacraments, if we understand the meaning of Baptism, it has to become God-centered. But our ordinary perceptions are not God-centered. They're self-centered in the sense that your physical presence within a perceiving body is the vantage point you

have for everything you know. So in this case self-centered doesn't necessarily mean—it's not a moral statement; it's just a fact. We are in this self-centered location, and therefore everything we know has come to us from a particular point of view. And we have to keep that in mind when talking to others because they don't have our particular point of view. It's not that there's necessarily anything wrong with our point of view, but it is just ours. It's not anything universal.

And this Aquinas understood very well. Aquinas was always about finding what was universal. And modern science is like that too. Modern science wants to develop principles that are truly universal that they can call "laws." They don't just want nice views. So we have to actually do something like that for ourselves. And that's what Paul was meaning when he said, "We live a new life." And again, in Ephesians St. Paul says, "In God we more and have our being." All right, that's the truth mentioned earlier—or you mentioned it—that's the truth. But do we perceive it? No! We rarely perceive that we are moving in God, swimming in God, according to this other person's view.

Rather, we live in ourselves—in our particular selves—perceived either on a material level, emotional level or mental level most of the time. And we live basically an illusion, therefore. That's really the only deduction you can make from all of this, is that the normal perceptions we have are illusions or delusions. We're deluding ourselves on a regular basis. Jesus once said to his disciples, "If you want to be my disciple, you must deny your very self." Okay. So he apparently was aware that they were not into the true self. So he says, "You must deny your very self, and come follow me." Why? Because the true self will be found following Jesus.

Now I believe that children probably naturally grow and probably do rather well for most of their lives, if they were properly cared for. But at a certain point really sin does interrupt our development. Well, part of it's sin and part of it is the needs of the world. At one point Jesus prayed—he said, "Father, Lord of heaven and earth, I thank you for having revealed to the merest children what you have concealed from the learned and the clever." Now what is that supposed to mean? It's referring to the fact that there are such people who are learned and clever; and their learnedness and their cleverness is real knowledge, but it only has to do with life in this world. It has nothing to do with the spirit; it has nothing to do with relating to God. That's why Jesus could praise his Father for revealing to merest children. Children can receive light. And I think we underestimate even ourselves. And that's one advantage of psychoanalysis. If you ever get into that, you can uncover in your own life rich experiences of God—and children do [have such experiences of God.] But at some point that usually terminates because we get so much into, well, what we have to do. We have to get an education. We have to be trained for a job. We have to start making money. And none of that really in itself has anything to do with God. That all has to do with learning and cleverness, but not God. And so Jesus says then, "If you want to enter the kingdom of God, you have to become again like a child." That is, you have to resume your natural development, which I might say—I hope not to offend anyone—has stopped ever since the day you first went to school—in one sense it's true.

So this is about resuming our development, and I would say it is the principle purpose of the second half of life. And even if you are very young, as some of you are, if you're being called to the priesthood you're being called to the presbyterate, which means "the elderhood." And that means in a sense you're already called into the second half of your life—even if you say, well, I hope I sure live to be more than 52 or 53! Scott, what are you 26? See. He wants to live more than another 26 years, right? But he is still in the second half of life—see—because when you're called to priesthood, you're really called to being an elder, a presbyter; so you have to be in the second half of life for that. We're into the mystery of life.

Now I'm going to use another word, the "ego." Sometimes people like Jung and many modern-day psychologists—even though he is not modern but—many Western psychologists—put it that way—use the word "self" and "ego" in the same sense, but they really aren't the same because the self is an objective thing we can talk about. The ego is not an objective thing; it is "I." Ego means "I." So what we're talking about when we say "ego" is we're talking about the feeling of "I." And all that I tried to lead you through a few minutes ago with that other diagram, you're going eventually to have to personalize it to the point of your own personal feeling, not looking at yourself as if you were somebody else, but looking at yourself from within. Then you're in the ego. And the second half of life is about dethroning the ego and letting some other power, which is really the image of God, the grace of God, take center in your life.

Now another person might describe it differently, so there are different descriptions of this process. And you can play with them and work with them, and if you don't like something, it's probably for a good reason. Maybe you're understanding something for yourself that you have to understand. So don't ever take anybody's word for it. That's the whole idea of spirituality: see if it works; verify it for yourself. Don't take anything I say as true until you've tested it in your own life, because if you haven't tested it in your own life, it won't be any good to anyone. So I'm just really giving you a map. If a person has a map, it's great; but once you find the place, you don't need the map anymore. So I'm just trying to show you ways of seeing yourself and ways of experiencing yourself both objectively and subjectively. And that's a good place to stop for today.