

Blessed Are You: Living the Beatitudes

Christopher J. Ruff, M.A., S.T.L.

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Living the Beatitudes

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- **The Discipleship Series** -
Dynamic Resources for Small Groups

Blessed Are You

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The Discipleship Series

Novo Millennio Press

The Beatitudes

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him.

And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn,
for they shall be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek,
for they shall inherit the earth.

**“Blessed are those who hunger and
thirst for righteousness,**
for they shall be satisfied.

“Blessed are the merciful,
for they shall obtain mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they shall see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they shall be called sons of God.

**“Blessed are those who are persecuted
for righteousness’ sake,**
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Matthew 5:1-10

Author’s Note:

Jesus proclaimed eight Beatitudes in his Sermon on the Mount. For this book I have chosen to reflect on them in pairs in two instances:

- Session 1 reflects on “Blessed are the poor in spirit” and “Blessed are the meek.”
- Session 3 reflects on “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” and “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.”

The remaining four Beatitudes are discussed in individual sessions.

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Introduction

Welcome to *Blessed Are You*, part of the Discipleship Series of small-group resources.

I wish to dedicate this book to Our Lady of Guadalupe, who first introduced me as a child to the wondrous, world-defying vision of the Beatitudes. Let me explain....

The Little Man and the Beautiful Lady

I was in the fourth grade when Sister Mary Michael told our class the story of St. Juan Diego and the beautiful Lady.¹ Juan Diego was a simple, native laborer, she said. He was passing through the countryside on his way to Mass when Our Lady appeared to him in a shining cloud on Tepeyac Hill, in what is now Mexico City, and entrusted to him a message. He was to go ask the bishop on her behalf to build a church at the place of the apparition.

The good Bishop Zumárraga gave Juan Diego an audience and listened kindly to his story. Not surprisingly, though, he was skeptical. As Juan set out for home, the beautiful Lady appeared to him again and he told her what had happened. “I beg you to entrust your message to someone more known and respected so that he will believe it,” he said. “I am only a simple Indian whom you have sent as a messenger to an important person.”

She replied, “My dearest son, you must understand that there are many more noble men to whom I could

have entrusted my message and yet, it is because of you that my plan will succeed.”

I was spellbound as Sister Mary Michael told us the rest of the story, culminating in the moment when Juan Diego opened before the bishop the folds of his tilma, his cloak, which concealed a bouquet of the finest Castilian roses. They had been lovingly arranged there by the Lady as a wondrous sign of her wishes, since it was impossible to find such roses in the dead of winter.

At once Bishop Zumárraga fell to his knees – but not at the sight of the roses tumbling out of the tilma. He was transfixed by the tilma itself, which now bore the miraculous image of the Mother of God.

What God Has Written in Our Hearts

Little boy that I was when I heard that story, I remember thinking, “Wow, this is like a fairy tale – only it’s *true!*” It made me think of tales like Cinderella or the Ugly Duckling, in which lowly characters end up being the chosen ones. In this case little Juan Diego was chosen by ‘the Queen,’ Our Blessed Mother.

Isn’t it remarkable that even while our fallen natures crave fame, fortune and power, something deep inside us celebrates at the sight of the humble, the poor and the lowly being lifted up? It appears God has wired us to rejoice at the truth conveyed by St. Paul: “God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the

weak of the world to shame the strong, and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, so that no human being might boast before God” (1 Cor:27-29).

This is the wonderful ‘kingdom’ of the Beatitudes, and even our fairy tales hint at it!

Pale Replicas of the Original

St. Juan Diego exemplified the Beatitudes. He was poor in spirit, meek, a man of peace and righteousness, merciful in caring for a sick uncle, Juan Bernardino, and full of holy mourning at the prospect of his uncle’s impending death (until Bernardino was miraculously cured through Mary’s intercession!).

And yet, even as we acknowledge St. Juan Diego as a man of the Beatitudes, we must admit he is not their most perfect embodiment. Neither are the graced men and women whose stories are told in this book, though I have hand-picked them to illustrate each of the Beatitudes.

No, we find the defining portrait of the Beatitudes in the very Savior who proclaimed them, Jesus Christ. Born in a stable to a poor virgin, persecuted by the powerful, full of mercy for sinful, wounded humanity, weeping over Jerusalem, divinely righteous yet “meek and humble of heart,” bestowing a peace the world cannot give – Jesus is the ultimate Icon of the Beatitudes, compared to whom even the greatest saint can only be a pale replica.

“O the Blessedness, O the Joy!”

In the Aramaic spoken by Jesus, the Beatitudes contained no verb. And so Jesus did not actually use a ‘statement’ formula, like “blessed *are* the poor in spirit,” but rather a formula of exultation, of rejoicing – “O the blessedness of the poor in spirit,” etc. Bible translators have added the verb in an effort to make the text more intelligible to our ears.

Language scholars also say that what we translate as “blessed” could equally be translated “happy.” And so an alternative rendering would be, “O the happiness, O the blessed joy, of the poor in spirit, the merciful, the pure in heart...!”

Knowing all this, we can imagine the scene more vividly. From the Mount of the Beatitudes, Jesus looks lovingly at the crowd below, speaking to them from the fullness of his burning heart. He holds out to them a blessedness, a joy, that he yearns for them to share – and not just later in the glory of heaven, but even now in this world of light and shadow.

In the words of the renowned Scripture commentator William Barclay,

The beatitudes in effect say, “O the bliss of being a Christian! O the joy of following Christ! O the sheer happiness of knowing Jesus Christ as Master, Saviour and Lord!” The very form of the beatitudes is the statement of the joyous thrill and the radiant gladness of the Christian life.ⁱⁱ

The Point of this Little Book

The goal of this book is to help those using it to let their hearts be opened and touched, so that they may drink deeply from the well of this joy – from the Living Water that is Jesus Christ – and live out the Beatitudes in their daily lives.

To help foster this goal, *Blessed Are You*, like the other books in the Discipleship Series, incorporates Scripture passages, snippets of wisdom from the Catechism and recent Popes, stories of men and women touched by grace, and prayers and discussion questions.

It also includes a modest component of service described on pages 16-17 and 158. This last element, with its focus on love of neighbor, comes from the conviction that true discipleship must take seriously Jesus' words, "Whatever you did for the least of my brethren, you did for me" (Mt 25:40).

I pray, dear reader, that we may all be made worthy vessels of the Beatitudes that leapt from the heart of the Son of God that day on the mountainside in Galilee. And as we strive to cooperate with God's grace, my thoughts turn again to the beautiful Lady of Guadalupe, to whom this book is dedicated. May her maternal gaze be upon us, and may she speak to us the words she directed that day in 1531 to one of the little ones of the Beatitudes, Juan Diego:

"Listen and let it penetrate your heart.... Do not be troubled or weighed down.... Do not fear any illness or

vexation, anxiety or pain. Am I not here who am your Mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Am I not your fountain of life? Are you not in the folds of my mantle? In the crossing of my arms? Is there anything else you need?"

Christopher Ruff

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- i An excellent online source for more information on the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe is: <https://www.ewtn.com/saintsHoly/saints/O/ourladyofguadalupe.asp>
 - ii William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2: New Daily Study Bible*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002) 102.

How to Use This Book

The Discipleship Series of small-group materials aims to be simple and flexible. What follows is everything you need to know to move forward:

Establishing and Running One or More Groups

- Form one or more small groups (5-12 people each) through personal invitation or parish announcements. For customizable bulletin inserts/flyers, visit www.ChristopherRuff.com and click on “Parish Launch Kit.”
- If established for Lent, the groups should meet weekly. Otherwise, once a month tends to be more workable for most people’s schedules. Typical length for a session is about 90 minutes. Whatever time frame is established, it should be rigorously respected.
- Each group should have a facilitator. It can be the same person at each meeting, or the facilitator role can rotate.
- The job of the facilitator is not to be an expert in the material or to do a lot of talking. Rather, it is to start and end the meeting on time, to help keep things moving and on topic, and to foster a friendly, supportive environment in which everyone feels invited to contribute.
- The group members decide where they would like to meet. It is ideal to hold the sessions in each other’s homes since a key goal is to bring

faith into daily life. If this is not workable, a room on church grounds is fine, or some combination of the two.

- Each member is expected to read the material prayerfully ahead of the session, jotting a few notes in response to the “Questions for Discussion.”
- The session begins with the Prayer to the Holy Spirit or some other appropriate prayer so that hearts may be opened to God’s presence.
- It is strongly recommended that the group members then read aloud the material for that session, taking turns reading a few paragraphs or a small section. This pattern should continue all the way through the discussion questions. Experience has shown this reading aloud to be not only do-able, but quite fruitful, making the material fresh and alive. The group may agree to strategically abbreviate the material to be read aloud if a session is particularly long or it is consuming too much time.
- When there are about ten minutes left in the allotted schedule, it is time to proceed to the “Group Prayers of Intercession,” even if the group has not finished all the discussion questions.
- The prayers of intercession are intended to be spontaneous prayer intentions. They direct the power of prayer to various needs and

simultaneously deepen the spirit of fellowship in the group. Conclude with the “Closing Prayer.”

- The session should end on time, even if members are eager to keep going. This is vital for the health and longevity of the group. It is good to follow with fifteen or twenty minutes of social time for those who are able to stay. Simple refreshments are a nice touch, with emphasis on the word simple; otherwise, people feel pressure to keep up with high expectations.

The Service Component

- The Service Component distinguishes this program from many other small-group studies. It is anticipated that group members will devote an hour or two to some form of service between sessions (if meetings are weekly, this could be an hour or two each month). The service may be carried out individually or together with others.
- Service can take many forms, but it should come from the heart. Certainly service to the poor, the sick, the elderly, the homebound, the homeless, etc., has always had a privileged place for Christ’s followers.
- Some may already be devoting a great deal of time to service. In that case, it is enough to consciously “dedicate” some portion of that

service to the group’s communal effort and spirit.

- Each set of “Questions for Discussion” includes at least one that touches on the component of service. This is to keep alive the awareness of the importance of the service aspect, which however is done on the “honor system” (with no one watching over anyone else’s shoulder).

Group Etiquette

- Pray for the members of your group between sessions.
- Maintain confidentiality.
- Be a good listener and encourage everyone to contribute to the discussion, without anyone monopolizing. Members that are more talkative should allow everyone a chance to respond before they speak a second time.
- Love your neighbor by speaking charitably and refraining from any kind of gossip.
- Be on time, come prepared, and actively take part in discussion and prayer.
- Take seriously the service component so that you may be a loving (and always humble) witness to the others in your group.
- Be open and expect God’s action in your life and prayer—expect to be changed!

Recommended prayer to start each session:

Prayer to the Holy Spirit

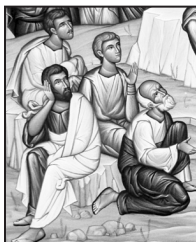
**Come Holy Spirit,
Fill our hearts with the fire of your love.**

**Draw us near to Jesus,
so that we may witness to his presence
in every moment of our lives.**

**Renew us, so that our homes, parishes,
neighborhoods and world
may be transformed into the heavenly
Father's kingdom on earth,
where love and mercy reign.**

Amen.

Session 1



The Poverty That Makes Us Rich

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven....
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Matthew 5:3,5

The Lord in His Scriptures

The Blessed Poverty of the Tax Collector

[Jesus] told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others:

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you,

this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Luke 18:9-14

Rich in the Things of God

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

“Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’

or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.”

Matthew 6:19-21, 25-34

Meek and Humble of Heart

“Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.”ⁱ

Matthew 11:28-30

Soak in the Word

Two Minutes of Silence

Reflect...

The Gospels were written in Greek, and there were two words in Greek for “poor”: *penés* and *ptóchos*. *Penés* referred to the “working poor,” laborers of the lower class who struggled yet somehow managed to get by. But *ptóchos* referred to a much more radical kind of poverty, the poverty of beggars, of people driven to their knees, possessing nothing. Lacking any social standing, these beggars were utterly dependent on the generosity of others. Remarkably it is *this* word, *ptóchos*, that is used for the poor whom Jesus declares “blessed,” or “happy.”

What is he saying? Is Jesus advocating a life of destitution, of extreme material poverty? No, on the contrary, he calls on his disciples – then and now – to alleviate that kind of misery, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked.ⁱⁱ It is not material poverty that he is declaring blessed. Rather, “blessed are the poor *in spirit*.” Jesus is praising a state of mind and heart in relation to God. We are blessed if we understand that we come to God with empty hands, utterly dependent on him, like beggars or little children.

In the Parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, we see that the tax collector acknowledges his poverty also in another way – as a sinner. He beats his breast and cannot even raise his eyes as he beseeches the Lord for mercy. Jesus leaves no doubt about the lesson of the parable: “Every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted” (18:14).

We should be poor in spirit in both these ways – in our complete, childlike dependence on God, and, like the tax collector, in the humble recognition that as sinners we depend particularly on his mercy and forgiveness. This should not depress us, but rather fill us with hope. The beautiful paradox is that it is precisely when we humbly fall on our knees and acknowledge our sinfulness and our dependence on God that we become open to the divine grace and love that “exalts” us, or literally “lifts us up.” This is captured in the words of the Little Flower, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, as she reflects at the end of her life on the meaning of sanctity:

“Sanctity does not consist in this or that practice, it consists in a disposition of heart which makes us humble and little in the arms of God, conscious of our weakness and confident to the point of audacity in the goodness of the Father.... [Sanctity] is to recognize our nothingness, to expect everything from God as a little child expects everything from its father....”ⁱⁱⁱ

Of course, by God’s grace, one member of the human race was poor in spirit *without* sin – the humble Virgin Mary. Her *Magnificat* (the closing prayer for this session), bursting with joy, glorifies God, recognizing that in his great mercy he has lifted her up from her lowliness, “scattered the proud,” and “filled the hungry with good things!”^{iv}

Hers is not a moral poverty. Mary does not need to beat her breast as a sinner. But she recognizes her littleness and utter dependence on the grace and providence of

God. She knows she has nothing of her own and must be cared for like the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. Her concern is not for herself, but for God and his kingdom.

The other Beatitude we have paired with “blessed are the poor in spirit” for this session is “blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” We have paired them because the meanings are very close and complementary. The only trouble is that in English the word “meek” is often taken to mean weak and passive, lacking in confidence and easily trampled upon. But that is not what is meant by the Greek word *praus* that we find in the Gospel of Matthew.

That Greek word carries several important connotations, including gentleness, humility and self-control. It is interesting to note also that it was used to describe domesticated animals obedient to their masters. Christian meekness, then, is docility to the Lord, humble responsiveness to the workings and directives of the Holy Spirit, with gentleness and self-control. We are to model our meekness, our docility, on that of Jesus, who said, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me.”^v

We see, then, how closely these two beatitudes align, and once again we are struck by how beautifully they are embodied in the Blessed Virgin Mary. She was completely emptied of self and dependent on God, and she was perfectly docile to his direction. “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.”^{vi}

So what blessed assurance does Jesus give to those who are poor in spirit, to those who are meek? He assures them that the kingdom of heaven is theirs, and that they shall inherit the earth.

This is really two ways of saying the same thing. The kingdom of heaven exists wherever God reigns in the human heart. His kingdom has come wherever his will is done (“on earth, as it is in heaven”), and it will be unveiled in its full glory in the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city spoken of in Hebrews 11:16 and depicted in Revelation 21. It is this kingdom, this “new heaven and new earth,” that belongs to us if we are poor in spirit, if we are meek and responsive to the Lord. It can belong to us even now, in the midst of the challenges and sufferings of this world, bringing us a blessed joy and peace that the world cannot take away.

Catechism of the Catholic Church

2547 – The Lord grieves over the rich, because they find their consolation in the abundance of goods.^{vii} “Let the proud seek and love earthly kingdoms, but blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.”^{viii} Abandonment to the providence of the Father in heaven frees us from anxiety about tomorrow.^{ix} Trust in God is a preparation for the blessedness of the poor. They shall see God.

Pope Benedict XVI

In his 2007 Christmas message, Pope Benedict XVI said faith and humility are needed to recognize the meaning of Jesus' birth. He noted the humility of those present:

The humility of Mary, who believed in the word of the Lord and, bending low over the manger, was the first to adore the fruit of her womb; the humility of Joseph, the just man, who had the courage of faith and preferred to obey God rather than to protect his own reputation; the humility of the shepherds, the poor and anonymous shepherds, who received the proclamation of the heavenly messenger and hastened towards the stable, where they found the new-born child and worshipped him, full of astonishment, praising God (cf. Lk 2:15-20). The little ones, the poor in spirit: they are the key figures of Christmas, in the past and in the present; they have always been the key figures of God's history, the indefatigable builders of his Kingdom of justice, love and peace (*Christmas Message, December 25, 2007*).

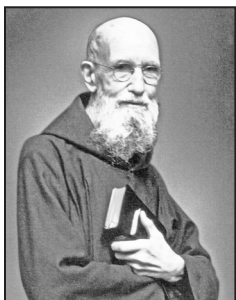
Pope Francis

In his message for the 29th World Youth Day, Pope Francis urged young people to imitate Christ in becoming poor in spirit, quoting St. Paul's letter to the Philippians:

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (2:5-7).

Pope Francis continued:

Jesus is God who strips himself of his glory. Here we see God's choice to be poor: he was rich and yet he became poor in order to enrich us through his poverty (cf. 2 Cor 8:9). This is the mystery we contemplate in the crib when we see the Son of God lying in a manger, and later on the cross, where his self-emptying reaches its culmination (*Message of January 21, 2014*).



The Lord in the Life of His People

“Thank God Ahead of Time”

In every age, God raises up from among his humble followers – from among the “poor in spirit” – holy men and women who bear witness to him in extraordinary ways. We usually think of them as figures at a distance from us in time and space – Francis of Assisi, Vincent de Paul, Thérèse of Lisieux. But the Spirit is always moving, even in times and places that might surprise us. And so this is the story of “Barney of Wisconsin” – otherwise known as Blessed Solanus Casey.

“Uh-oh, look who’s coming.”

The Capuchin friars who had been enjoying a moment of fellowship suddenly busied themselves as a tall, thin friar with horn-rimmed glasses, bald head and long gray beard approached, carrying his fiddle and bow. This captive audience knew they were about to be serenaded by Fr. Solanus Casey. Oh, they loved him dearly, but that high, squeaky voice of his was like fingernails on a chalkboard. They smiled and applauded a couple of times before each discovered something he needed to do. And so, as he sometimes did, Solanus made his way to the chapel, where he finished playing before his Lord in the tabernacle.

God Chooses the Humble

Fr. Solanus Casey was the porter, or doorkeeper, at St. Bonaventure Monastery in Detroit. Ordained a priest in 1904, he could celebrate Mass, but his superiors had withheld from him the faculties of preaching and hearing confession because of poor academic performance during his formation. Solanus had accepted this decision in simple obedience. Everything seemed to point to a life of faithful, quiet obscurity, and if God had not had other plans, humble Solanus would have been quite content with that.

The sixth of sixteen children born to Irish immigrants, he came into the world on November 25, 1870, in Hudson, Wisconsin, and was named for his father, Bernard (“Barney”) Casey. The Caseys were a devout farm family, and they filled their tiny log cabin with singing, stories and prayer, especially the rosary. The younger Barney worked hard on the farm until, at age 17, he left to supplement the family income through a variety of jobs, including lumberjack, prison guard and streetcar operator.

One day while driving his streetcar through a rough area of Superior, Wisconsin, Barney saw a woman brutally stabbed to death by a drunken, cursing sailor. This display of sheer evil shook him to the core and helped stir him, at the age of 21, to pursue a priestly vocation, entering the seminary in Milwaukee. It would be a winding and academically challenging path that saw him given the religious name “Solanus” and finally ordained a Capuchin priest at the age of 34.

Doorkeeper for the Lord

For his first assignment, Fr. Solanus was sent to Sacred Heart Parish in Yonkers, New York, where he served as sacristan and doorkeeper. He quickly became an ardent promoter of the Seraphic Mass Association, an apostolate of the Capuchins in which people would enroll and be remembered in the Masses, prayers, sacrifices and good works of the friars around the world.

When people came to Sacred Heart Parish seeking counsel, prayers for healing, etc., their first contact was the kind doorkeeper, Fr. Solanus, who, as soon as he got a whiff of their worries or woes, encouraged them to enroll in the Seraphic Mass Association. Suddenly stories began to circulate about miraculous cures and remarkable answers to prayer. For just over fifty years until his death in 1957, this “doorkeeper’s ministry” would consume his life, in several different assignments, the longest of which returned him to St. Bonaventure’s in Detroit where he had begun.

Solanus was directed to keep records of the “special favors” received by those who came to him for help, and by the end of his life these filled seven large notebooks. He would never take any credit though, always attributing the miracles to the Seraphic Mass Association. But the throngs that waited in line at the door – up to two hundred people each day – knew the hand of God was upon him. He encouraged many who came for help to go to confession, humbly referring them to another priest, since he had not received faculties to hear confessions.

Time for Everyone, Care for the Poor

Brother Leo, a fellow friar at St. Bonaventure’s, said that even though huge crowds waited for the chance to meet with Solanus, “he would never hurry anybody. He would listen to your story as if he had all the time in the world, and he would try to advise you, console you, comfort you and then he would usually give a blessing. When the people got home, often they would discover whoever had been sick was cured.”^x

But this extraordinary man was not a pious holy card figure. He loved to joke, played volleyball at recreation, enjoyed hot dogs piled high with onions, and was a baseball fan. He was also a man of profound social charity. His love for the poor inspired the Capuchins in Detroit to open a soup kitchen which became a major source of relief for poor eastside workers during the Depression. By 1931 the monastery soup kitchen was providing up to 3,500 free meals each day. Solanus spent a lot of time there, giving comfort to the hungry. One man, who became a dedicated kitchen volunteer, had come to him previously with a stomach tumor, asking for prayers. Solanus told him to go see his doctor again and then to come back and help feed the hungry. To the doctor’s amazement, the tumor had disappeared.

Thank God Ahead of Time

Solanus believed that when making an appeal in prayer, we ought to “thank God ahead of time.” He felt this showed such a level of grateful trust that it made

it much harder for God to say no! He used this “prayer psychology” on the Blessed Mother, too. A woman named Gladys Feighan came to him one day, confiding her desire to have another child. She had had one baby, but then lost the next three due to a blood problem.

“You will have another child, Gladys,” he said. “Your Blessed Mother will give you another child. You must believe this so strongly that before your baby is born you will get down on your knees and thank the Blessed Mother. Because once you ask her, and thank her, there’s nothing she can do but go to her own Son and ask him to grant your prayer.”^{xi}

There were tears in his eyes as he spoke. Five years later, Gladys gave birth to twins.

Certainly many people who came to Fr. Solanus with prayer petitions did not see their petitions granted, and the good friar prepared them to bear their crosses. But in this and other cases of confident assurance, he was likely given the grace of special foreknowledge.

A Holy Death

Solanus lived to the advanced age of eighty-six. The day before his death from a long and painful skin ailment, he told his superior, Fr. Gerald Walker, “I looked on my whole life as giving, and I want to give until there is nothing left of me to give. So I prayed that, when I come to die, I might be perfectly conscious, so that with a deliberate act I can give my last breath to God.”^{xii}

The next morning his voice was weak and inaudible, until, as the attending nurse reported, he suddenly sat straight up in bed and said in a clear voice, ‘I give my soul to Jesus Christ.’ He died on July 31, 1957, precisely fifty-three years – to the day and to the hour – from his first Mass.

Twenty thousand people came to pay their last respects at Solanus Casey’s viewing in Detroit. The opening of his cause for canonization was accepted by the Vatican in 1976. He was declared “Venerable” by Pope John Paul II in 1995 and beatified by Pope Francis in Detroit on November 18, 2017. It should come as no surprise that reports of miracles attributed to his intercession are plentiful, and continue to increase.

Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss what it means to be “poor in spirit” and “meek.” In what ways do you see those Beatitudes evidenced in the story of Blessed Solanus Casey?

2. In declaring blessed those who are poor in spirit, Jesus clearly was referring to something deeper than material poverty, for it is possible to be rich in the world’s goods yet remain poor in spirit, and it is possible to be materially poor yet greedy and self-centered. Still, we see Jesus in the Gospels invite a rich young man to sell all his possessions, give the money to the poor and follow him (cf. Lk 18:18-25). Saints throughout the ages have done exactly that (St. Francis of Assisi comes to mind) in imitation of Jesus, who possessed nothing. And members of religious congregations take a vow of poverty. So what kind of relationship do you think exists between these two things – poverty in spirit and the riches of this world?

Blessed Are You: Living the Beatitudes

3. Discuss examples of people who have been meek and poor in spirit and the ways that was expressed in their lives. These could be figures from the Bible, saints or other well-known persons, or people in your own circle of family and acquaintances.

Session 1 - The Poverty That Makes Us Rich

4. What sorts of practices, habits or attitude shifts might help you to better reflect these two Beatitudes in your own life?

5. Discuss ways you might undertake the service component of this Discipleship Series program, whether individually or as a group, and how love of neighbor contributes to being poor in spirit.

Group Prayers of Intercession

8 to 10 minutes

Closing Prayer

The Magnificat

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me
blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
And his mercy is on those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm,
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their
hearts,
he has put down the mighty from their thrones,

and exalted those of low degree;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent empty away.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.
Amen.

Luke 1:46-55

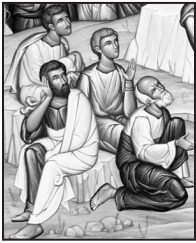
- i New American Bible, copyright 1991, 1986, 1970, Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, D.C., and used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.
- ii Cf. Mt 25:35-36.
- iii St. Thérèse of Lisieux. *Last Conversations*, Trans. John Clark, OCD. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1977) 129.
- iv Lk 1:51,53
- v Jn 4:34.
- vi Lk 1:38.
- vii Lk 6:24.
- viii St. Augustine, *De serm. Dom. in monte* 1,1,3:PL 34,1232.
- ix Cf. Mt 6:25-34.
- x Diane M. Hansen, "The Holy Doorman of St. Bonaventure: The Story of Venerable Solanus Casey." *The Word Among Us*. July 2011.
- xi Catherine Odell. *Solanus Casey: The Story of Father Solanus* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2007) 228.
- xii "Road to Sainthood." *Fr. Solanus Guild*, 2017. <http://solanusc Casey.org/who-is-father-solanus/road-to-sainthood>.

Additional Works Consulted/Recommended:

Crosby, Michael, O.F.M., Cap. *Thank God Ahead of Time: The Life and Spirituality of Solanus Casey*. Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2009.

Odell, Catherine. *Solanus Casey: The Story of Father Solanus*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2007.

Session 2



Holy Mourning

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Matthew 5:4

The Lord in His Scriptures

The Root of All Mourning

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... In him was life, and the life was the light of men.... He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not.

John 1:1,3-4,10-11

The Tears of God

[W]hen he drew near and saw the city he wept over it, saying, "Would that even today you knew the things

that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you, when your enemies will cast up a bank about you and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and dash you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another in you; because you did not know the time of your visitation."

Luke 19:37-44

Jesus Weeps at the Tomb of Lazarus

When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Then Mary, when she came where Jesus was and saw him, fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled; and he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept.

John 11:31-35

Sorrow Will Turn to Joy

"A little while, and you will see me no more; again a little while, and you will see me.... Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her

hour has come; but when she is delivered of the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world. So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”

John 16:16, 20-22

They Shall be Comforted

Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Saying this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rab-bo’ni!”

John 20:11-16

He Will Wipe Away Every Tear

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.” And he who sat upon the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.”

Revelation 21:2-5

Soak in the Word

Two Minutes of Silence

Reflect...

All the Beatitudes are paradoxical, but perhaps this one most of all. This is especially true when we recall that the Greek word for “blessed” is also translated “happy.” Everyone knows that mourning is a form of sadness, so how can someone who is mourning be happy?

Or does Jesus mean that the blessedness of those who mourn is found not at all in mourning itself, but only in the assurance that God will eventually relieve the pain? That would make mourning itself simply an unfortunate affliction, like a headache. The only blessedness would be the good news that God has promised he will make it go away.

But no, mourning, as excruciating as it is, has dignity and value; it has something that makes it blessed even before the comfort comes. It is not just any kind of sadness. Rather, it is profound sorrow over a loss, often the loss of a beloved person through death.

Mourning thus *pays tribute* to what has been loved and lost. And the intensity of our mourning reveals the intensity of our love. As long as the object of our mourning is good and worthy, our mourning is blessed. It shows that our hearts are properly attuned. It would be a grave defect, a kind of curse, to fail to mourn the loss of a beloved spouse, a child, a dear friend. O unhappy the lot of the heart that is cold and unmoved in the face of such a loss!

When St. Padre Pio’s mother died, he knew with a

supernatural awareness that she was in the state of grace and destined for heaven – yet he wept inconsolably, like a little child. Someone near him expressed surprise at this reaction from such a holy man. Padre Pio replied simply, “the heart has its part.”

In the account of Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus, we see the blessedness of mourning in the tears of the very Son of God – even though he knew he would be raising Lazarus from the dead a few moments later. Perhaps God willed this detail in John’s Gospel partly to show us that faith is not meant to be a vaccine against the emotions of the heart. Death is meant to be mourned, because God created us not to die but to live together forever. Our fallenness is at the root of death, and this separation brought by sin deserves our sorrow – indeed, it calls for this sorrow that pays tender tribute to the beloved.

So yes, there is blessedness in mourning itself. Of course that blessedness is incomplete until it is finally crowned by the ultimate comfort of heavenly reunion, where every tear is wiped away. But even now God comforts those who mourn. No one should ever feel alone in their mourning for, as Psalm 34 tells us, “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted.”ⁱ He is near in moments of prayer and adoration. He is near in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. And he is near through the love of other people.

Mourning is a worthy response whenever a profound good is lost (a loved one, health, home, employment), or whenever man’s fundamental dignity is caused to suffer.

We mourn the hatred and bloodshed in the Middle East, the plight of the homeless and hungry man on the street, the desperation of a teenager being bullied, the loneliness of the bedridden woman in the nursing home, the tragedy of abortion and its victims.

And if we mourn properly, we continue to trust and hope in God, and we are also spurred to act, to bring loving help and relief to those whose pain we mourn, for in touching their wounds we touch the wounds of Christ.

This brings us to the most worthy and blessed mourning of all. St. Francis of Assisi experienced it, and it echoed in his cry of lamentation – “Love is not loved!” It is mourning at the world’s rejection of God, a rejection that, by our sins, nailed our Savior to the cross. This is the theme especially of the first Scripture passage for this session (John 1:1,3-4,10-11).

Such sorrow pays tribute to a love beyond all other loves, and it has been felt by all the saints. St. Gemma Galgani, the saint profiled in this session, mourned intensely whenever she thought of her sins. She had such a vivid awareness of Jesus’ love for her, a love reflected in every drop of blood he shed in his Passion. This meant that even her smallest faults caused St. Gemma deep sorrow.

Returning for a moment to the example of St. Francis, we discover that he could never have enough of meditating with tears of love on the sufferings of Christ. One of

his biographers recounted the following incident:

“A young nobleman...found him one day utterly lost in sorrow. He addressed him, inquired the cause of his grief, and sought to comfort him. But his sorrow was not of earth, and earth had no consolation for it. The Saint could only cry out, amidst his tears and sighs, ‘Ah, if you would comfort me, let us weep together over the most bitter and most loving Passion of our Savior.’”ⁱⁱ

And there we have the key that most perfectly unlocks the paradox of this Beatitude. Yes, there is something good, noble and worthy in all true mourning, for it pays tribute to love. But when the cause of our sorrow is the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, our beloved Savior who died only that we might live, then mourning itself is truly blessed and sweet, and we can say with St. Francis, “if you would comfort me, let us weep together....”

Catechism of the Catholic Church

1450 – “Penance requires . . . the sinner to endure all things willingly, be contrite of heart, confess with the lips, and practice complete humility and fruitful satisfaction.”ⁱⁱⁱ

1451 – Among the penitent’s acts contrition occupies first place. Contrition is “sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again.”^{iv}

1452 – When it arises from a love by which God is loved above all else, contrition is called “perfect” (contrition of charity).^v

Pope Francis

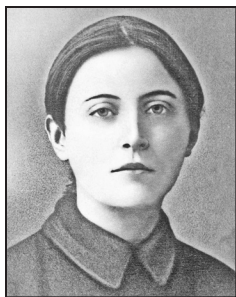
How can those who weep be happy?

Those who have the ability to be moved, the ability to feel in their heart the pain in their lives and in the lives of others. These ones will be happy! Because the tender hand of God the Father will console and caress them (*Solemnity of All Saints, Nov. 1, 2015*).

Pope Benedict XVI

There are two kinds of mourning. The first is the kind that has lost hope.... But there is also the mourning occasioned by the shattering encounter with truth, which leads man to undergo conversion and to resist evil. This mourning heals, because it teaches man to hope and to love again. Judas is an example of the first kind of mourning: Struck with horror at his own fall, he no longer dares to hope and hangs himself in despair. Peter is an example of the second kind: Struck by the Lord’s gaze, he bursts into healing tears that plow up the soil of his soul. He begins anew and is himself renewed^{vi} (*Jesus of Nazareth*, p 86).

The Lord in the Life of His People



A Sorrow so Sweet

One of the aims of the Discipleship Series is to introduce, where appropriate, holy men and women who are not so well known. Such a one is St. Gemma Galgani, a 19th century Italian young lady who wept at the sufferings of Christ, prayed intensely for the conversion of sinners, and constantly extended herself to her neighbor in need. God had his eye on her from a tender age.

“All of a sudden, a voice in my heart said to me, ‘Will you give me your Mamma?’”

“Yes,” I answered, “if you will take me as well.”

“No,” the voice replied, “give me your Mamma without reserve. I will take you to heaven later.”

“I could only answer ‘Yes’ and when Mass was over I ran home.”^{vii}

In the autobiography she wrote for her spiritual director, this is the exchange Gemma Galgani recalled having with Jesus on May 26, 1885, the day she was confirmed at the age of seven. It was the first of many mystical encounters she would have in her short lifetime.

Could we imagine any suffering more painful for a young child than to be invited to surrender her mother to death? Yet Gemma gave her “yes” and her mother died

eighteen months later. This would be the first of many sorrows that she would embrace with a willing heart.

‘Adorable’ Gemma

Gemma was the fourth of eight children and the eldest daughter born to Enrico Galgani, a successful pharmacist, and his wife Aurelia, on March 12, 1878, in an Italian village just outside Lucca, near Florence. The couple was devoutly Catholic, and Aurelia in particular saw to the religious education of the children.

Gemma was an enchanting little girl. “Adorable” is the word we might use today. She had a beautiful round face, delicate features and an inner light that shone from her mature, tranquil eyes. Enrico doted on her. Upon getting home he would habitually ask, “Where is Gemma?” She was more conscious of this favoritism than he was, and from time to time took him to task, reminding him that he had other children!

When Gemma was two years old, she and her brothers and sisters were sent to a private school run by two eminent ladies of Lucca, Emilia and Elena Vallini. She attended the school for five years and the ladies later wrote of her:

She was serious, thoughtful, wise in everything, and differed from all her companions. She was never seen to cry or to quarrel; her countenance was always calm and sweet. Whether petted or blamed, it was all the same, her only reply was a

modest smile, and her bearing was one of imper-turbable composure. Her disposition was vivacious and ardent, yet during her whole time with us we were never obliged to punish her.^{viii}

The ladies also noted that Gemma was diligent in her studies and read easily from the Breviary by the age of five. They wrote that all the children loved her, “especially the little girls, who always longed to be with her.”^{ix}

In Love with the Suffering Jesus

Before her untimely death, Gemma’s mother would pray with her children morning and evening and taught the older ones to make little meditations. Sometimes she would take Gemma in her lap, point to the Crucifix and say, “Look Gemma, how this dear Jesus died on the Cross for us.” Gemma would reply, “Tell me more, Mamma, tell me more.”

Gemma’s eagerness to meditate on the Passion of Christ would blossom further when, shortly after her mother died, she was sent to a school run by the Sisters of St. Zita in Lucca. Gemma later reflected:

“I wanted to know all about the life and Passion of Jesus. I told my teacher of this desire and she began, day by day, to explain these things to me, choosing for this a time when the other children were in bed. She did this, I believe, without the Mother Superior knowing of it. One evening when she was explaining something to me about the crucifixion, the crowning with thorns, and all the sufferings of Jesus, she explained it so very well

that a great sorrow and compassion came over me. So much so that I was seized immediately with fever so intense that I was forced to remain in bed all the next day. From that day on the teacher explained such things only briefly.”^x

The Passion of Christ became, and remained, the very center of Gemma’s life. In it she saw the ocean of God’s love and the atrocity of sin which offended so great a love. God allowed her to behold her own sins in a vivid way, as if through his eyes. On one occasion she wrote to her spiritual director, Fr. Germano, “Yesterday evening I wept much at his feet. Oh how bitter were those tears, Father, and at the same time how sweet.... All my sins came to mind.... I felt greater sorrow for them than ever before.... But what consoles me is that I felt such great grief for them, and I would not wish this sorrow ever to be cancelled from my mind or ever to grow less.”^{xi}

Sorrow for Sin, Prayers for Sinners

When we read of the saints lamenting their sinfulness, we may shake our heads. Surely the sins of this lovely soul were not so great? But it is our own dullness to sin that throws us off. Most of us feel our sin like a grain of sand in our shoe. Gemma’s sin was surely a much smaller “grain” – but she felt it as if in her eye. It caused her intense pain, but she welcomed that pain, and would not have had it any other way.

It was not only her own sins, but the sins of others that caused Gemma to grieve. One of her childhood teachers

said, “I remember that when she was quite a small child she grieved if any of her companions acted wrongly....she prayed much, but especially for poor sinners, and offered for them such mortifications as a child can perform.” This mission of reparation for sinners only grew stronger as her life progressed. She was consumed with longing for their salvation and begged God constantly to reach the hearts of sinners with his grace and mercy.

Here we must round out the portrait of Gemma Galgani, lest the impression be given that she was occupied solely with things unseen and mystical. While it is true that these were woven deeply into the fabric of her daily life, she took responsibility for the household in the manner expected of an eldest daughter whose mother had died, performing her tasks with great diligence.

A Heart for the Poor

Gemma also had extraordinary compassion for the sufferings of the poor and the sick. She wrote in her autobiography, “Every time I went out I used to ask father for money, and if, as sometimes happened, he refused I would take bread and flour and other things. And God arranged that I should often meet poor people, every time I left the house. To the poor who came to the door I gave clothes and whatever else I had.”^{xii}

Her Aunt Elisa wrote of Gemma:

She often visited the sick in the hospital, to whom she brought a little money or something

else, and whom she comforted especially by speaking of God. She also overflowed with charity for the poor and used every means in her power to help them. Sometimes she would take something to an old man who lived at the corner of our street. At that time we ourselves were in reduced circumstances, so that I felt compelled to tell her, “There will be nothing left for our own supper.” Gemma used to answer: “Providence will give us plenty.” ...She also used to work for the poor, made them stockings and mended for them.^{xiii}

One of the servants in the home of Gemma’s rich aunt and uncle recalled the two of them walking along the road and meeting an old woman shivering from a lack of warm clothing. Gemma had just finished renovating a heavy under-skirt which had been given to her by her aunt. Seeing a sheltered doorway, Gemma entered it, removed the underskirt and gave it to the elderly woman, saying, “Pray for me that the Lord may set me on fire with his love.”^{xiv}

Mourning Sin to the Last

So much more could be written here about St. Gemma Galgani: about the several suitors who, seeing her beauty and grace, asked her to marry them; about her desire to be a nun, which would never be realized; about her sudden, miraculous cure from a deadly disease at the age of twenty-one; about the stigmata she received later that same year; and finally, about her months of agony culminating in her holy death at the age of twenty-five.

Through it all, Gemma maintained an extraordinary humility. Let us conclude with these words expressing her sense of unworthiness, yet her desire to belong only to Jesus.

“Oh, Jesus, how many sins? Do you not see them, Jesus? But Your mercy is infinite. You have forgiven me so many times, so forgive me once again. You know all, Jesus, You see my heart. You know, Jesus I am wholly Yours, all my body and soul. Let me suffer – yes, but I desire to be wholly Yours; I want to be in heaven with You.”

Gemma Galgani died on April 11, 1903, after an agonizing illness, most likely tuberculosis. She was beatified by Pope Pius XI on May 14th, 1933, and canonized by Pope Pius XII on Ascension Thursday, May 2nd, 1940.

Questions for Discussion

1. How is blessed mourning connected with love of God and love of neighbor?

2. What are some situations in our world today that summon us to mourning, as well as to action?

3. What types and situations of mourning did St. Gemma Galgani experience? Which were most intense and why?

4. In our life as Catholics, when and how do we express mourning, sorrow (don't only think of funerals)? How does each instance testify to love?

5. This Beatitude says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." In what ways does God comfort those who mourn? Have you experienced it?

6. There is a connection between the capacity for *proper mourning* and the capacity for *true joy*. Where you find the one, you find also the other. Discuss why this is so.

Group Prayers of Intercession

8 to 10 minutes

Closing Prayer

Stabat Mater

At the cross her station keeping,
Stood the mournful mother weeping,
Close to Jesus to the last.

Through her heart, his sorrow sharing,
All his bitter anguish bearing,
Now at length the sword had passed.

Bruised, derided, cursed, defiled,
She beheld her tender child,
Till His Spirit forth he sent.

O, thou Mother, fount of love,
Touch my spirit from above,
Make my heart with thine accord.

Make me feel as thou has felt;
Make my soul to glow and melt
With the love of Christ our Lord.

Let me mingle tears with thee,
Mourning Him Who mourned for me,
All the days that I may live.

By the cross with thee to stay,
There with thee to weep and pray,
This I ask of thee to give.

Let me, to my latest breath,
In my body bear the death
Of that dying Son of thine.

Let us Pray:

Lord Jesus, as we mourn your Passion on Calvary,
May we mourn it also in the sufferings of our
neighbor in need,
Reaching out in love to the poor, the sick, the dying,
the lonely, the outcast,
Knowing that whatever we do for the least
of these your brethren,
We do for you. **Amen.**

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- i Ps 34:18.
 - ii Pamfilo de Magliano, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010) 236.
 - iii *Roman Catechism* II,V,21; cf. Council of Trent (1551): DS 1673.
 - iv Council of Trent (1551): DS 1676.
 - v Cf. Council of Trent (1551): DS 1677.
 - vi Joseph Ratzinger. *Jesus of Nazareth*. (NY: Doubleday, 2007) 86.
 - vii Gemma Galgani, *Autobiography*. Website dedicated to St. Gemma Galgani, 2017. www.stgemmagalgani.com/2008/11/autobiography-of-saint-gemma-galgani.html.
 - viii Germanus Ruoppolo, C.P., *The Life of St. Gemma Galgani*. (Charlotte, NC:TAN, 2004) 2.
 - ix Ibid., p. 3.
 - x Galgani, op. cit.
 - xi Ruoppolo, op. cit., p. 155.
 - xii Galgani, op. cit.
 - xiii Amedeo, C.P., *Biography of St. Gemma*. E-Catholic 2000, 2017. www.ecatholic2000.com/galgani/amedeo.shtml.
 - xiv Ibid.

Additional Works Consulted/Recommended:

Vast website devoted to St. Gemma Galgani: www.stgemmagalgani.com.