



How to Use This Book

Your 40-day Lenten journey into *Marks of the Christian* will lead you to listen to God's Spirit speaking in your own heart and experience. It will help you pay attention to what God is saying and how God is working in your life to heal, bless, fill, and shape you. It will encourage you to be honest with God about all that is moving in your heart and mind, *offering it all as prayer*. In this way, intimacy with the Holy One may grow rich and full, leading you also to love the world as God loves it.

You will benefit most by finding a regular time during the day to work through this book. It is easier to maintain a spiritual practice if you do it at the same time each day. Mornings are best for many people. The house and heart are still quiet and the busyness of the day has not yet distracted the mind. Others find that the noon hour or before bedtime serve well. Do whatever works for you to maintain a regular, daily encounter with God.

You will note that there are no readings for Sunday. The 40 days of Lent traditionally exclude Sundays, the day we celebrate the resurrection of Christ.

Although this book is designed to be used during the 40 days of Lent, it can be used at any time of the year. If you pick a time other than Lent for your journey, it would still be best to walk day-by-day through the book. This will result in a deeper experience that will mark your life with God in lasting and significant ways. It is also better to complete the journey than to give it up part-way through because you can't get it done in 40 days. Take a longer period if you choose. Set a schedule that works for you and be consistent.

Several elements comprise each day's journey, including great riches of faith, experience, and the witness of saints, mystics, and scholars. Sometimes you may find it fruitful to spend more than one day with a particular reflection, question, or quotation that stirs you. If one element speaks more deeply to you than others—blessing, challenging, or troubling you—spend time with

it. Always go where there is fruit. Don't worry that the other elements don't touch your mind and heart that day. Go where Christ is pleased to speak and give himself to you. Luther wrote, "If you pause here and let him do you good, that is if you believe that he benefits and helps you, then you really have it. The Christ is yours, presented to you as a gift."⁴

Consider using a notebook as you work through this book. Jot down questions and insights, graces and blessings, challenges and changes in your life as they bubble up in you.

Each day of the journey begins with a brief reflection on a verse (or portion of a verse) from Romans 12:1-15. Most of these are written in the form of prayer, responding to what God speaks through the biblical text. Typically, several days are given to reflecting upon a single verse or phrase. Each day, the perspective changes, shedding new light on a particular mark of the Christian life. These daily reflections are intended to stir your own thinking and meditation, so read slowly. You may want to read each reflection two or three times, perhaps reading it aloud. Let the words sink into your consciousness. Take time to consider and benefit from what God is saying to and in you.

Following the daily reflection, you will find the heading *Biblical Wisdom* and a brief passage from the Bible that relates to the meditation. Read the biblical text slowly. Notice how it affects you, and jot down words, ideas, feelings, memories, and questions stirred by the reading.

After the biblical reading, you will find *Theological Thoughts*. These nuggets of insight, from saints and mystics, scholars and theologians, expand upon thoughts and experiences in the reflections.

Next comes the heading *Silence for Meditation*. Here you might spend anywhere from five to twenty minutes meditating on the readings. Begin by getting centered. Sit with your back straight, eyes closed, hands folded in your lap, and breathe slowly and deeply. Breath is a gift of God, the gift of life. Do nothing but observe your breath for two or three minutes. Focus your awareness on the end of your nose or your hands in your lap. Feel the breath (life) enter . . . and leave . . . through your nostrils. Each breath draws in God's gracious decision that you should live . . . and know abundant life in God's love.

Once you feel yourself settling down, open your eyes and slowly look over the daily meditation, the biblical text, and the theological nugget again. Note

the words, thoughts, and feelings that draw you. Savor and explore meanings and implications for your life. Jot down any insights that occur to you. Do the readings raise questions for you? Write them down. Do the readings suggest anything you should do? Write it down.

Stay with the meditation time as long as it feels useful. When your mind is ready to move on, close your eyes, observe your breath for a minute, and thank God for the gift of life and for what the Spirit has shown you in your meditation.

The next heading is *Questions to Ponder*. Here you will find three questions on the day's readings. The questions use the insights of the readings to draw you into your own experience, so you may see where and how God is working in your life. Think them through and jot responses in your notebook.

Then move on to the *Psalms Fragment*. Here you will find a verse or two from the Hebrew book of Psalms that relates to the day's readings. The Psalms have always been a mainstay of prayer in the Christian tradition, speaking the deepest hope, joy, and pain of our lives.

Pray the *Psalms Fragment* and reflect for a moment before continuing to *Journal Reflections*, which offers three suggestions for journaling. Each suggestion invites you, in light of your experience, to reflect on a thought or experience expressed in the readings. Many of us don't really know or understand our thoughts and feelings until we write them down and look at what flows from the pen or through our fingers on the keyboard. We may be surprised to see what is actually moving and happening in us. Then we can draw insight and consolation from what God is saying and doing.

Journaling can be profoundly transforming when it is a regular spiritual practice. It keeps us more closely in touch with movements in our hearts and minds. It helps us discern what comes from God's Spirit and what doesn't lead to greater life, joy, and service. It may be useful for you to use a separate journal rather than your notebook, or to do your journaling on a computer. On the next page, you will find some suggestions for how to keep a journal.

The *Questions to Ponder* and *Journal Reflection* exercises assist you in reflecting on the daily readings and Scripture quotations. You need not answer every question. Choose those that draw you or move thought, memory, or emotion. Again, go where there is fruit.

Above all, be honest. Sometimes the most appropriate response to a question is, “I don’t know.” Don’t hide your real thoughts and feelings (as if you could hide them from God). Offer them all as prayer, even when they are harsh and troubling. Such honesty is the road into intimacy with the Loving Mystery whose love burns for us and in us.

The final heading is *Prayer for Today*, a one- or two-line prayer to end your session. You might repeat this prayer from time to time throughout the day.



Journeying with Others

You can use this book (and I hope you do) with another person or with a small group. It is best for each person first to do his or her own reading, reflection, and writing in solitude. When you come together, share the insights you have gained from your time alone. Your discussion can focus on any of the elements of each day's journey.

Questions to Ponder is a natural place to start discussions with a group or spiritual friend. However, you might find that a section from a daily reflection, *Biblical Wisdom*, or *Theological Thoughts* has stirred you or members of your group. If so, start there, and let the discussion flow in the directions that are most fruitful for the needs and questions of the group. The Spirit will lead.

If you are working through the book with people you trust, you may feel comfortable sharing some of what you have written in your journal. No one should ever be pressured to do this, however. It should also be a ground rule that whatever is said in a small group stays in the group.

Always remember that your goal is to grow in relation with Christ and his church. You gather to learn from one another, not to argue or to prove that you are right and the other is wrong. Practice listening and trying to understand why your discussion partner or small group members think as they do.

Sharing your experiences is a way of encouraging and guiding each other. It provides the opportunity to offer feedback gently and to help each other translate insight into action.

By all means, pray together. This strengthens the spiritual bonds among those who take the journey together. Spend a few moments sharing prayer requests around the theme of the day. Then pray for each other and your faith community as you bring your time together to a close.