

STUDY GUIDE

# SWEET CROSS



A Marian  
Guide to  
Suffering

BY LAURA MARY PHELPS

Hello, friend!

Is there anything better than suffering?

OK. So maybe there *are* things better than suffering. Like drinking lattes. And pink ponies. And drinking lattes *on* pink ponies.

But here is the deal. Suffering is the one thing in this life that you are guaranteed. It's not optional. It's a reality. So why not do it well?

Whether you picked up this study guide to do on your own or in a small group, my prayer is that it will lead you out of the fear of suffering and into the sweetness of the cross. With the Blessed Mother as our guide, we will take a deep dive into her virtues, learning how to embrace our cross by imitating the Woman who knows a thing or two about suffering.

Because Mary is perfect, she exemplifies all the virtues. St. Louis de Montfort describes ten of these virtues as the specific characteristics of Our Lady that we should aim to emulate. These ten principal virtues of Mary are:

*Lively faith*  
*Ardent charity*  
*Divine wisdom*  
*Heroic patience*  
*Profound humility*  
*Angelic sweetness*  
*Surpassing purity*  
*Blind obedience*  
*Universal mortification*  
*Constant mental prayer*

Living out these virtues enabled Mary to endure her cross. Let's ask Mary to pray for us as we make our journey — that we may obtain and put the same virtues into practice in our own lives.

I can't remove your cross, but I can help you carry it. It's time to stop running from it and start running for it. So what do you say we link arms and do this together, arm in arm with Mama Mary? Let's approach our suffering in a whole new way, falling so deeply in love with all of Jesus that there's no place we would rather be than pressed up against him at the foot of the cross.

With love,  
Laura



## Embracing Your Cross with Unshakable Confidence

**N**ot too long ago, I lived in Code Red pretty much all the time. Never mind that we're commanded over 300 times in Scripture to "be not afraid." Never mind that some of the things I fear are highly unlikely to happen to me. The truth is that the "unlikely to happen" has already happened. That thing that happens to "other people" happened to my family. And so, I began to fear that everything, no matter how crazy, is likely to happen. And that scared me. (p.16)

What are you afraid of?

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Take some time to sit in the quiet and ask the Lord to reveal everything that binds you in fear. List your worries in the space below: the small ones, the big ones, and the ones in between.

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Now, look at your list and ask yourself the following questions:

1. Is this a rational fear?

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2. What will happen to me if my worst fear occurs?

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3. If the fear has happened, how did I respond? (I think it's safe to say it didn't kill you, because you are holding this study guide in your hands.)

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Have you ever been in a circumstance where you chose not to be afraid? Were you still scared? How did things turn out?

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When the angel Gabriel told the Virgin Mary that God had chosen her to be the mother of the Messiah, how did she respond? (Read Luke 1:26-38.)

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Can you give God an unshakable "yes" even when you are not provided all the information or guaranteed that everything will turn out OK?

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What three things did Mary do before she responded to the angel (see pp. 23–24)?

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Of these three things, which do you struggle with the most?

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What practical thing can you do to work on the virtue of unshakeable confidence?

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On p. 26, we read, “Fear keeps us in pursuit of false safety.” Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.

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*Mother Mary, when God calls us to scary places and circumstances beyond our control, help us to reach for your virtue of unshakable confidence. Remind us that our security is in the Lord.*

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## Embracing Your Cross with Lively Faith

**W**e tend to believe that when people are slammed with hard suffering, it's the pain of the trial that causes them to lose faith. But according to Dr. James Dobson, that's not true. He says that suffering isn't what shreds a person's faith. In fact, he believes that people have the ability to withstand an enormous amount of pain, provided that the circumstances make sense. In other words, if we could just understand why the Lord has permitted us to suffer this or that, we'd accept it.

*But would we really? (p. 30)*

According to Timothy Keller, there are two responses to our question of "Why?" when suffering intersects our life. What are these responses? (See p. 30.)

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Have you fallen into either one of these responses? Explain.

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Keller calls both of these responses “spiritual dead ends.” Do you agree?

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We resist the cross when we marinate too long in our “why.” We entertain doubt in God and doubt in ourselves (“There is no way that I am strong enough to handle this!”) Is there a cross God is extending to you that you continue to resist?

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How was Mary able to accept God’s will for her life (see p. 34)?

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How can we know when we are operating out of a lively faith?

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When I learned to replace my “why” with Mary’s “how,” my view of the cross changed. In what area of your life could you replace your “why” with Mary’s “how”?

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Do you have a favorite Scripture verse you can turn to when your faith is wavering?

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Look up the following verses, and in your own words, describe the way of God’s goodness and your reason for faith. (These Scripture verses were originally compiled by Lisa Brenninkmeyer in *Praying from the Heart Guided Journal*.)

Isaiah 55:8–9

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Deuteronomy 32:39

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Exodus 34:6–7

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Psalm 84:11

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Lamentations 3:22–23

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Nahum 1:7

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*Dear Lord, help me obtain a faith as firm as the Blessed Virgin Mary's. I do want to stand steady in the storm, full of confidence in your goodness. When an unexpected twist in my story sideswipes me, help me resist asking "why," which only leads to confusion, and instead, to ask "how," which always leads to your instruction. Amen.*

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## Embracing Your Cross with Ardent Charity

*In the year following the Sandy Hook shooting, the Lord was preparing to teach me a great lesson — one that I resisted and abhorred at the time but that I'd draw from for years to come. It was in this season of suffering that I was invited to participate in his kind of love, a suffering love, a pure love; a love that's not driven by feelings but is rooted in desiring the greater good for another. In theory, this shouldn't be hard. Isn't this what we all want for those we love? Yet it proves difficult for most of us. Because the greater good is not always convenient or popular, and more often than not, it involves suffering. This is what the Lord was about to teach me: Sometimes, the greater good means removing the safety net and letting our loved ones fall. (p. 41)*

St. Francis de Salles called Mary the “Queen of Love.” Is that what your family and closest friends would call you? What are you the Queen of, if not love?

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I am the Queen of “Let me take care of it.” I am so afraid of suffering that I set out to control everyone and everything around me to ensure that no one around me will suffer because, inevitably, that will require me to suffer too. Can you relate? Can you think of a time when you chose to prevent the pain of a loved one so that you were not called to participate in it? How did that work out for you?

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Can you think of a time when you chose the greater good by allowing pain and trusting that the Lord would be with you?

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Something incredible and truly mysterious occurs when we say yes to God and choose the way of sacrificial love. He sends the Advocate; the Holy Spirit, like a rushing wind, sweeps over our lives, and we step into the same battles we told God we could never survive. In times of trouble, trial, and fear, do you call on social media, Netflix, or chocolate, or do you call on the Holy Spirit? Think about this. When you see the breaking news or get bad results from the doctor, or the teacher emails you again, to whom do you run? Who do you call? And if it is not the Holy Spirit, why not?

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Mary is the perfect model for remaining in and calling upon the Holy Spirit — after all, we call her the “Spouse of the Holy Spirit.” While we are not married to the Holy Spirit, when Jesus ascended into heaven, he not only left us Mary as Mother, but he also left us the Advocate — the Holy Spirit — to help us. This is excellent news! What do we know about the Holy Spirit? Look up the following verses and write down what you learn:

Romans 15:13

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Acts 1:8

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Isaiah 11:2

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John 14:26

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Romans 8:26

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Galatians 5:22–23

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Remember these verses and call upon the Holy Spirit when you feel discouraged by the lack of love and purity in your heart. Invite the Spirit to set your heart on fire for love of God — to give you a heart like Mary’s. When we choose pure love — sacrificial love — the love that hurts but is for our good — we can trust that the Lord will not abandon us. He will protect us and keep us from harm. The question is, my friend ... do you believe this?

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*O my Jesus, I am the Queen of everything wrong! I choose a safe love, a comfortable love that keeps you at arm's length. Today, I vow to choose a pure love like Mary's. Make me an ardent tower of charity so that I always cooperate in Your plan. Come, Holy Spirit, come! Amen.*

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## Embracing Your Cross with Unwavering Trust

**F**ear is amazing, isn't it? In a split second, the fear of an uncertain future completely hijacked the joy of the present moment. I allowed the unknown to unravel the known because, deep down, I didn't trust that God was in control. How could he be? After all, this wasn't the plan! We had a plan, Lord! Why did you have to go and screw it all up? (p. 51)

Do you believe that God knows what is best for you? Be honest.

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What do *you* believe is best for you, and how might this differ from God's plan for your life?

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Mary's unwavering trust in God allowed her to choose what HE had planned over her plans. "Many of our problems with trust come because we don't understand the object of our trust. The object of trust is not the confidence that God will give, or do, or change, whatever we are asking of him. It is rather confidence in our union with him, the firm belief that whatever is happening now is the best that could happen to advance our union" (Joseph A. Langford). Let's unpack this sweet little madness, shall we?

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What strikes you most? What word or sentence smacks you hard in the face? Do you like this? Do you agree with this? Do you want to burn this book? Do you think this sounds great in theory but is highly impractical for your modern-day life?

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Are you hoping for the immediate? The cure to the disease. The job. The house. The baby. The man. The winning lottery ticket. The fast weight loss. The event. The problem, whatever it is, solved. The obstacle removed. Or, do you hope for the full presence of God and what he has planned, no matter how long that might take? No matter that you may never obtain it this side of the veil? Is your goal blissful eternity, or are you such a control freak so terrified of suffering like Jesus that you prefer comfort at the moment, despite knowing that it won't last?

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To obtain a trust like Our Lady's, we must have the proper perspective. Do you live in freedom with an eternal perspective? Or do you live in the bondage of fear, clinging to a surface vision?

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Read Proverbs 3:5–6. What do you imagine the Lord making your path straight means?

A straight path is a path that leads to heaven.

Jesus walked a straight path.

The Blessed Mother walked a straight path.

A straight path is not free of obstacles, nor does Jesus say He will remove them. He will, however, be with us, and we walk through them.

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*Lord, give me a supernatural vision and a trust like Mary's so that when my plan is interrupted, I stand steady, confident that this is the straight path that leads me to You. Amen.*

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## Embracing Your Cross with Divine Wisdom

**T***True love goes beyond head knowledge because head knowledge in a relationship will only get you so far. Memorizing the facts will help you only so much. If it's wisdom you're in search of, you need to get out of your head. (p. 61)*

Too many of us live in our heads. What's in your head? What do you think about? Are your thoughts in line with God's thoughts?

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To align our thoughts with God's, we need to desire Divine Wisdom ardently. Dr. Caroline Leaf says: "Our capacity to access God's goodness is based upon our wisdom, and wisdom comes from spending time in the Word of God" (p. 61). How much time do you spend in God's Word?

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What two things must we do to experience transfiguration by God's Word?

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Do you struggle with sitting in silence?

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How often do you invite the Holy Spirit into your life?

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Have you ever been transfigured by the Word of God? If so, describe your experience.

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What does your current prayer life look like? What is working for you? What do you feel is lacking?

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Thinking God's thoughts versus responding to every selfish thought that runs through our brains is counter-cultural. Mentioning your submission to the will of God at the next public school event probably won't win you any new friends. What aspects of the culture today frighten you most? Where do you see God's wisdom greatly lacking?

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*One of Our Lady's many titles is "Seat of Wisdom." Jesus, Eternal Wisdom and Word of God, dwelt in her, was cradled in her arms, and rested safely on her lap. Mary, in a sense, is the human throne of him who reigns in heaven. (p. 66)*

What role did wisdom play in Mary's ability to embrace the cross?

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Do you struggle in accepting a share of Christ's suffering? Stand with Mary at the foot of the cross. Bring your troubles, pain, and all the crosses you just can't bear to accept but wish that you could. Can you leave your burdens at the foot of the cross? Why or why not?

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Standing at the foot of the cross is where our relationship with Jesus begins. Stay there a bit longer.

Do you long to lean in, or is your inclination to run away? Be honest with where you are. You can't fool God, and he knows the honest answer. He longs to meet you exactly where you are.

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*O my Jesus, I lack the wisdom to believe that there is more to the story than I can see. Mother Mary, intercede for me. Meet me at the cross and gently hold me there. I want to lean in. I want to be in a relationship with your Son. I want to share in his sufferings. Help me to love God above all things, especially above my desire for everything to make sense. Grant me Divine Wisdom that I may always accept and embrace the cross. Amen.*

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## Embracing Your Cross with Heroic Patience

*We all have this desire to know the future — that urge to pick up the veil and take a peek. At the root of this desire is fear. We want to know how much longer, when this will end, and what will become of us, as if we'd be satisfied with the answer. As if knowing the date were the true remedy for the peace our hearts lack. These are the weeds, sprouted from seeds of fear, that thrive and grow in our cluttered minds. If only we were as good at keeping our life-giving thoughts alive as we were nurturing these weeds! It's moments like these when I recognize the blessing of addiction. The AA way of recovery is to take one day at a time. We don't look to the past with regret, and we don't fear what lies ahead. The only moment in life we are ever guaranteed is the one that we're presently living in. (p. 70)*

Do you struggle with patience?

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Are you content living in the present moment, or do you stretch your neck to see the next step ahead?

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Laura talked about “three tips” she learned from Mary. What are these three things? List them below (see pp. 71–72).

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What keeps you from trusting God in the waiting?

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When have you been tempted to “go back to Egypt” (see p. 73)?

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God created us for heaven. We were not made for this world. If we fully understood this, our perspective would be one of a constant upward movement. The wait wouldn't matter because our confidence would not be rooted in how well things go on earth, but on how focused we stay on heaven. Take a few moments to ponder this. Ask Mary to help you keep your eyes on heaven.

*The goal of our lives, contrary to what the world says, isn't to make ourselves happy and as comfortable as possible on earth, but to bear all temporal sorrows patiently, after the example of Christ, so that we can enjoy life in heaven. Following Christ means we imitate Christ. If Christ suffered patiently, so should we. (p. 73)*

Can you think of a time of suffering that you complained through? How did this make you feel?

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Did the complaining lessen your suffering?

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Can you think of a time that you suffered quietly and patiently? How did this season's fruit differ from the season you complained in?

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*Heavenly Father, I do want heaven. It is the heavenly perspective while on earth that I struggle with. I don't like to wait. When you call me to heroic patience, fear gets the best of me. My mind wanders all over the place, and I doubt that your plan is good for me because, good grief, you take so long! I want to wait with you, not for you. I know you are working in my life. O sweet Mother Mary, please help me believe that no matter how long the wait, I can always trust that your Son is doing good work in me, through me, and for me. May I embrace the wait and never choose to reject the suffering. My eyes are on that crown of patience, Lord. With your grace and strength, I pray to obtain it. Amen.*

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## Embracing Your Cross with Firm Peace

**W**e all have a duffel bag stashed in the back of our closet, don't we? You may even have more than one. It's what we like to do with the crosses we don't want to deal with. (p. 79)

What's in your duffel bag?

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The problem with the phrase “out of sight out of mind” is that it's not true. We may think it is, but judging from the lack of peace in our hearts, families, and world, I propose that it is not. In fact, in most cases, it makes things worse. What virtue do we lack when we choose to hide what could lead to suffering (see p. 79)?

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*For the longest time, I thought peace was achieved by eliminating suffering. That as soon as this was resolved, or that was over, then I'd find peace. But that can't be the case because, should we entirely eliminate suffering, how many of us would consider Christ ever again? (p. 80)*

What has been your experience of “when this is over,” I will have peace? Did you find that to be true? Or were you handed another cross?

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What robs you of your peace?

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How can Mary's example of serenity encourage you in your suffering in all circumstances?

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What was/is the state of Mary's heart (see p. 83)?

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What did Mary do in response to disturbing circumstances?

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What is one thing you can do today to take a step toward your cross while maintaining peace in your heart?

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*Dear God, when it comes to accepting, not hiding, my suffering, please help me be more like your mother. Mary's peace did not come when her suffering was over. Her peace was the fruit of a well-carried cross. I know that suffering is the cross, and the cross is life, and there is no other way to internal peace but the holy way of the cross. Increase my humility so that I may never again try to avoid suffering, fully knowing that there will be no peace without it.*

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## Embracing Your Cross with Profound Humility

**F**or many years, the thought of reaching out for help with anything, be it a ride to school for my kids or a call to a therapist for myself, was cause for shame. Needing someone to step in and help carry the cross I believed Jesus gave to me to carry alone made me feel like a failure. A perfectionist to the core, I thought being perfect meant carrying the weight of the world on my own while maintaining a clean house and a thin body with a line of well-behaved kids in tow. (pp. 85–86)

God never intended for us to handle it all but rather, to hand it all over. What do you refuse to hand over and why?

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When we allow other people to step into our lives and help, we allow them to serve Jesus. This is how Jesus loves us through others. Does this insight change how you look at how you accept help?

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I have found that the people who love to serve others often have difficulty accepting help. This creates an imbalance in relationships and is often the consequence of a lack of humility. The Visitation is the perfect example of a friendship rooted in humility. Do you have this kind of friend?

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A better question might be: Are *you* this kind of friend? Not only one who gives but one who is humble enough to receive?

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God chose the very last place in the world so that he could have first place in our hearts. And Mary, without boasting, bragging, or making a big deal of it, simply agreed to it all, keeping much of it hidden yet proclaiming the greatness of God from the depths of her soul.

As followers of Christ, we know that “things will get easier for you when you surrender your life to God” is a myth. The truth of the matter is that things will get more challenging. As soon as Mary gave her fiat, it appeared that everything went wrong! And yet not once do we hear her say, “Really, Lord, after everything I have given up for you?” And what about you, friend? Have you ever had your own “Really, Lord?” moment? Your own “after all the prayers, volunteer work, and novenas, Lord, you go and allow THIS to happen?”

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Mary was in the business of making herself lowly. Have you ever prayed that the Lord make you lowly?

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When we choose lowliness, inviting others into our story gets easier. A trusted friend makes a world of difference when it comes to suffering. Do you see Mary as a trusted friend? Can you invite her into your story? How about your home, as Joseph did (Mt 1:24)?

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*Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of a mother who teaches me to embrace my lowliness and humility. I want to be the kind of friend who creates a safe space for people to enter into my story and offer help. I pray that I can be the kind of friend who doesn't turn down support or accept gifts awkwardly because it threatens my self-reliance. Put me on a path like Mary's, a way that reminds me that the degree of my lowliness on earth will be the degree of my greatness in glory. Amen.*

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## Embracing Your Cross with Angelic Sweetness

**A**wareness of sin and the desire to change is the beginning of our transformation. (p. 99)

I know that I can be aggressive, impulsive, and bitey in the heat of the moment. And this kills me because, really, all I want to be is sweet. But sweetness is more than an exterior demeanor, just as true charity goes deeper than secular love. Angelic sweetness is a virtue, and Our Lady has it in spades.

Are you aware of your sin, and do you desire transformation?

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How do we grow in the virtue of angelic sweetness? (Hint: This is what this entire book is about.)

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Have you considered the connection between sweetness and suffering?

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Mary's angelic sweetness led her always to give way to the impulse to bring others into the mystery, to draw us to God. Her sweetness flowed out of her fiat, and the same goes for us. In what area of your life are you holding back your fiat? What circumstances have you responded to without angelic sweetness?

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Mary's suffering did not make her bitter; her sorrow did not lead to anger. How about you? Be honest. You can't fool God. Have you been angry at God? How about bitter?

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*If we really understood what Jesus did on the cross for us and what it means for our salvation, loving God and pleasing him no matter our lot would be a no-brainer. If only we would close our mouths and open our hands to receive this gift of grace! (pp. 101-2)*

Mary didn't accept all because she was perfect. Mary was perfect because she invited the Holy Spirit into her life so that she could accept all. Do you believe that the Holy Spirit is capable of working miracles in your life?

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Inviting the Holy Spirit to work in us is a partnership. It will require us to allow him to root out everything of us that's not of Christ and to fill us up with what only pleases him. This is how we become sweet like Mary. And it is not easy.

What in you needs rooting out?

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To protect God's eternal plan, Mary had to be fierce. Being sweet does not equate to being a doormat. Mary was both sweet and fierce. Before reading this chapter, did you have a different outlook on sweetness? How does it differ now?

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Do you believe that the only way we will come to perfect surrender is by embracing our perfect mother? Explain why or why not.

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Can you give an example of how Mary has pointed you in the right direction, modeling how to live, softening your edges, and embracing God's plan with sweetness versus bitterness?

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*Lord, help me remember all the ways that Mary has guided me. I tend to focus on the things gone wrong. The unanswered prayers. And when I do this, I grow deeply sorrowful in a self-pitying way, which leads to anger. Help me carry my cross with joy and respond to others with kindness. I don't want to lash out at others but rather reach out to others. No one wants to be around angry people. Good grief, Lord, keep me from being that annoying angry person! Come, Holy Spirit. You are welcome here, and I will partner with you. Root out the garbage I cling to. Transform me into something beautiful. Amen.*

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## Embracing Your Cross with Divine Purity

**D**ivine purity sounds like a tall order, especially in today's world where sin doesn't matter, everything is relative, and we can do whatever we want so long as it doesn't hurt anyone. But "impossible" will never be an excuse for a believer all things are possible with God. (p. 109)

Let's be honest, though. Divine Purity does feel impossible today. The world is upside down. It's the kind of mess you look at, wondering, *Where do we even begin?* How would you describe purity?

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Have you considered divine purity outside of sexuality and chastity?

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A pure heart is sold out for God. Nothing competes with him. What about your heart? What/who competes with God?

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A sinner's heart is divided, and there is no pity in a divided heart. Do an inventory of your heart. What are you finding?

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What actions can you take to root out the impurity in your heart? (i.e., prayer, adoration, etc.)

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All sin matters. What "small sin" are you trying to convince yourself is OK?

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What does Mary hold fast to that we ought to imitate (see p. 113)?

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List the three reasons why this attitude of Mary's can be a game-changer for us (see p. 113).

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Have you experienced personal suffering transformed into a cause of joy? Or do you read that and think, "That's crazy talk!"?

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Do you believe that God wants to purify you through pain?

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*God isn't going to spare any of us our suffering in time because he wants to spare us the suffering of eternity. (p. 114)*  
Does this change the way you look at your suffering? Why? Why not?

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*OK, Lord, I am going out on a severe prayer limb here and begging you to power wash me with your grace. I do not want to be a person with a divided mind. I want to do all for you. Give all to you. Suffer all with you. I want a pure heart like Mary's. I want a pure heart so that your light is like a beam of radiance that shoots straight through me and out into this filthy world. Open my eyes to the small sins I am justifying and the garbage bags I refuse to take to the dump. Remind me that nothing you ask me to endure on earth compares to heaven's feast waiting for me. Help me keep my eyes on you and joyfully suffer all for you. Amen.*

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## Embracing Your Cross with Blind Obedience

**O**bedience is up there with root canals in terms of popularity. Yet Jesus calls us to obey, not because he's on some power trip, but because he knows what's best for us. Adam and Eve made it clear from the start that disobedience leads to sin and death, so why is it so hard for us to obey God? Why does surrendering to him feel like the worst idea ever? (p. 118)

Blind obedience. Both words sound terrible. Put them together and it's the worst! What are your first thoughts when you hear *blind obedience*?

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By her conduct, Mary reminds each of us of our serious responsibility to accept God's plan for our lives. How seriously do you take this call to obedience?

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How does your conduct reflect (or not reflect) your obedience to God?

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Fr. Louis Cameli writes that any significant call from God is going to involve cost. Are you a “cost counter”?

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Daniel 3 is a great chapter to help us better understand what obedience in the face of *literal fire* looks like. Take a moment to slowly read it, prayerfully meditating on the story. How did the men thrown into the fiery furnace respond?

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It is not our normal human reaction to sing, bless, and glorify the Lord when we have been thrown into the fiery furnace. When you are feeling the heat, how do you respond? How might singing, blessing, and glorifying God (while your face is on fire) change things for you?

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Saying “even if” to God is hard. We tend to say “only if,” as in, *Sure, I will do whatever you ask Lord, only if you do this one thing for me.* What are your “only if” prayers? Write them in the space below and ask God for the grace to turn them into “even if” prayers.

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When we pray the Rosary, we walk through the events of the life of Jesus. In doing this, we see Mary’s fierce love of the Lord. Do you pray the Rosary? If not, would you consider taking up this beautiful and life-changing devotion? If you do pray the Rosary, how has it changed you?

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One of the many ways that the Rosary changes us is by increasing our trust in God. When this happens, our prayer life is not so much about getting what we ask God for, but rather a confidence in our union with him. Do you have enough confidence in God to go to him in prayer simply to be with him, versus simply to get something from him?

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With the virtue of blind obedience under our belts, we lose our superficial vision of our lives. The goal of life is not to lose the cross, but for God to use it. Be honest. Where are you at today? Do you want to lose your cross? Or are you ready for God to use it?

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*Dear Lord, the thought of going blind and saying OK to a plan that I cannot control is terrifying. And yet, if I want union with you ... if I want peace in the storm ... if I want to be a true disciple who loves you for who you are and not what you give, then I must learn to embrace this virtue. And I do want this. For so long I thought that handing you what I love most meant I was giving up. But Mary shows me otherwise. You don't ever ask us to give up hope, only to demonstrate it. I am ready to demonstrate. I am ready to embrace obedience and experience freedom. I am ready to lose my "only if" faith and embrace an "even if" faith. Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word. Amen.*

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## Embracing Your Cross with Universal Mortification

**M**ortification” means putting the flesh to death. “Universal” implies all the time, and in every situation. In order to train our souls to virtuous and holy living, we need to strip our hearts of all attachment to worldly things, in every moment of our lives. We need to become masters of self-discipline and embrace self-denial, committing ourselves to God’s will while crucifying all our fleshly passions. When your love language is lounge socks, universal mortification is not only unenjoyable, it’s extremely difficult. (p. 132)

Do you practice daily mortification? If “no,” why not? If “yes,” how so?

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Imitating this virtue of dying to self in a world that encourages the very opposite is no small thing. It requires recognizing the insatiable desires of our hearts — those things and habits that continue to prevent us from advancing in mortification. Take time to ponder and examine your own heart. Enter into the silence and ask that the Lord reveal them to you. You can’t dig up weeds you do not see growing!

After you sit in the quiet, write down everything that the Lord is asking you to die to in the space below:

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Does anything on your list surprise you? What on your list will be the most difficult for you to lose and why?

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We all do things we wish we wouldn't do. If you are not sure about this, think of the sin you confess over and over again. It is only through God's grace and the Holy Spirit that we are able overcome ourselves by practicing self-denial. The best way to overcome all the obstacles that keep us from universal mortification is to stay close Mary. Cooperating with God's plan means letting go of our own. Have you ever let go of your plan in exchange for God's plan? What was your motive?

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We don't have to give up everything while worrying about how we give this up forever. That's a sure recipe for disaster. We need to be like Mary and ponder the present moment. Do you live in the moment? Or do you like to freak out about what might happen next week?

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Radical conversion and holiness is what we are after, and fun fact: *It will hurt*. But not forever. We all have a choice. Wear the crown on earth, or wear it in heaven. Which will you choose?

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*Dear Lord, your light shines into my soul and you see it as it is. And honestly? That kind of freaks me out because I know my soul is stained with sin I need to lose. Give me the fortitude to resist temptation and the desire to lose my sin. If I do not let go of the baggage that keeps me self-focused, I will never be free to take up the cross, and the cross is what leads me to you. Help me to see that a little suffering on earth is well worth eternity with you.*

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## Embracing Your Cross with Constant Mental Prayer

**T**here is a Latin phrase I recently stumbled upon: *Coram Deo*, which means “in the presence of God.” To live *coram Deo* is to live one’s entire life in the presence of God, under the authority of God, to the glory of God.” Being aware of God in our midst is something we can learn to do constantly. Can we take the garbage to the dump and fix broken appliances while remaining aware of God’s presence? After all, without God, we wouldn’t have garbage to throw away or appliance to fix, or working hands and feet to make it all possible. At the very least, shouldn’t we thank him? (p. 143)

What’s the number one excuse as to why people don’t pray?

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It was on a silent retreat that I stopped being busy, and for the first time ever, tapped into my interior self. Have you ever been on a silent retreat? If so, what was your experience?

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From the moment we are baptized, God is speaking to our souls ... constantly. What noise is in your life, keeping you from tapping into this soul communication?

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Without silence our prayer is ineffective. Why? Because it is only in the silence that we hear God speak. Without the quiet, we are simply giving God our to-do lists.

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When is the best time for you to sit in solitude? Depending on what season of life you are in, finding this quiet (especially in the morning) can prove difficult. And not just difficult, but frustrating. But even five minutes before the throne of God is fruitful.

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What does your silent prayer life look like?

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Mary kept her focus on God in all things at all times. What would your life look like if you transformed everything into prayer, praise, and gratitude?

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Do you see the difference between constant mental prayer and mindfulness/gratitude? Prayer has special focus on God. When we transform our thoughts and actions into prayer, everything changes — especially the cross.

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Do you pray for God to take your cross away? The devil delights in that thought: that we would lose our cross. Why do you think this is so?

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Knowing now that the cross is the surest place of meeting Jesus, are you still tempted to lose the cross?

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*Dear Lord, Saint Maximilian Kolbe said, "If your suffering were to increase even one degree your glory in heaven for all eternity, then it would secure an infinite benefit. Life passes quickly, even suffering passes, while eternity will last forever. It is worth it." While I may never understand my suffering, I pray to believe it is worth it. Amen.*

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