Having a faith conversation with old and new friends is as easy as setting the table.
The C21 Center Presents

The FAITH FEEDS program is designed for individuals in Catholic parishes who are hungry for opportunities to talk about their faith with others who share it. Participants gather over coffee or a potluck lunch or dinner, and a host parishioner facilitates conversation using the C21 Center’s bi-annual magazine, C21 Resources.

This FAITH FEEDS themed conversation will be on prayer. Selected articles have been taken from the Spring 2014 and Fall 2018 issues of C21 Resources, and the C21 book, Catholic Spiritual Practices.
The first time I met with my spiritual director after entering the Jesuits, he asked me how I pray. One of the things I mentioned was regularly rattling through Hail Marys. I told him that I tend to pray them throughout the day – on the bus, on walks, during dinner – whenever. I also tend to pray them during set times of prayer, and sometimes with the Rosary.

I remember being embarrassed by that response. I felt like I should have been engaged in “deeper” forms of prayer – meditation, contemplation, or imaginative prayer with Scripture. But I had little experience with those. I felt that my prayer was in some way inadequate.

I prayed Hail Marys because I didn’t know how else to pray. I’d had other experiences of prayer, but when it came down to it, rattling through some memorized words was the easiest way for me to pray when I knew I needed to or when I felt a desire. The Hail Mary and the Rosary were like training wheels, and I thought eventually they’d come off.

They haven’t yet.

I still say Hail Marys all the time. Most often, I say them in times of stress or anxiety. When I am walking into a room full of people, walking into a classroom the first day of the semester, or waiting to get feedback on a paper I worked hard to finish. I pray them when I finish conversations with people on the street, every morning when I look at the cover of the New York Times, or whenever I hear news of someone’s death.

It’s not uncommon for me to recognize myself going through Hail Marys and wondering, “How long have I been doing this for?” My Hail Marys can be subconscious. Praying them seems to be my first reaction to most things. My Hail Marys and my Rosaries are frequently unexciting, unmoving, imageless,
and emotionless.

Yet, there is a simple gratification in the touch of Rosary beads and the sound of ancient prayers. They don’t bring me into an immediate conscious connection with God or His Blessed Mother. They often fail to satisfy a never-ending desire to hear God speak or to feel His touch. Sometimes, it is hard to even sense His presence in the moment of my rote praying.

Nonetheless, I find that it continues to be a most valuable use of time and a sincere act of devotion. The Rosary is helping me learn that the fruit of prayer is quite often experienced outside of itself. Sometimes in completely unrecognizable ways.

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I met Dorothy Day’s granddaughter once. She left the Catholic Church when she was younger and eventually came back. When I asked her why, she told me that some old priest told her to pray the Rosary every day. She took his advice, and there you have it.

St. Therese of Lisieux said that the Rosary is a long chain that links heaven and earth. That feels true for me. Hail Marys and the Rosary are indeed like training wheels, but ones that I will need forever. They train my mind, my body, my eyes, and my heart to live as though I am linked to heaven. Linked by things that may seem meaningless – touching beads and uttering words – but that do have a supernatural effect on my life.

It is often the moments outside of my Hail Marys when I can most feel their impact. I notice a deeper calm, less anxiety, and greater peace. I can more easily see God at work because my Hail Marys so frequently remind me of His existence.

And so, I continue rattle to Mary my needs, wants, and fears. In turn, she helps me remember the long vision, the deeper desire, and the Fruit of her womb. Through my rattling to Mary, I’m reminded that there is much more to life than the present.

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“Our prayers may be awkward. Our attempts may be feeble. But since the power of prayer is in the one who hears it and not in the one who says it, our prayers do make a difference.”
—Max Lucado

Summary
In this reflection, Billy Critchley-Menor, S.J., shares about his love for the Hail Mary, which has become his “go-to” prayer. Far from being a shallow or unthoughtful way of praying, he shares how this devotion has become almost as natural as breathing to him. This simple prayer has converted hearts in dramatic ways but has also provided steady comfort for so many people. As he shares, in this particular prayer the Blessed Mother reminds her children to gaze toward heaven from time to time.

Questions for Conversation
1. Do you have a “go-to” prayer? What are the prayers and devotions that you rely on in challenging moments? How do you pray for other people or for yourself?
2. When do you feel closest to God? When do you feel God most at work in your life?
3. One of the distinct features of Catholic devotion is cultivating a relationship with Mary. Is this practice a part of your faith? Are there particular prayers or devotions that you find comforting?
Every relationship begins somewhere. Some begin romantically with our hearts alive in the excitement of getting to know someone who we are drawn to for the very first time. Some begin at our birth with our introduction to our family. Some begin at school or work, where we first meet our peers and colleagues. Some begin at our baptism, when the immersion into water symbolizing both our dying and rising with Christ signifies our inherent immersion into a set of relationships (the entire Body of Christ, which is the Church) that can never be undone. Yet, there is one relationship that begins before all others.

Some relationships are deeply intimate, where we reveal our true selves and are open to the other person’s true self, as with a spouse, close sibling, or best friend. Sometimes those same relationships are difficult or strained, causing us to become disinterested in another. Some relationships are simply professional, casual, or superficial and nothing more becomes of them. Some relationships will last for a lifetime, while others last for just a short stint. Yet, there is one relationship that will last forever.

Everybody, whether conscious of it or not, has a relationship with God. The fact that you or I exist, or that anybody exists, testifies to the reality that we are in relationship with our Creator. I believe that all human beings, by virtue of simply being human, have a capacity for God that is fundamental and part of the deepest core of who we are. I also believe that God is already and always extending an invitation to us to be in relationship. But how do we recognize this presence of God in our lives?

It can be difficult to consider the importance of intimacy in our relationship with God because, whereas we are all familiar with the effort and attention necessary to work on our relationships with various people in our lives, our connection to God can appear to be so different. In a sense, our relationship with God is indeed different from those experiences of intimacy with others in our lives, but we nevertheless bring ourselves to every relationship we form, including the one with our Creator. Our hopes and joys, our anxieties and sorrows are carried into how we relate to God just as much, if not more than, they are in relationship to others. We don’t even have to overtly express these things to God. The reason is, as St. Augustine wrote in his Confessions, because God is closer to us
than we are to ourselves.

This inherent sense of intimacy can be daunting for those of us who live in a technologically saturated world, which allows us to keep a distance from one another through the creation of screens, masks, and social-media “profiles” that give us a false sense of control over what people can or cannot see of us. God does not need a Facebook account or an online-dating profile to learn about us. God already knows us better than we could imagine.

Awareness of God’s closeness has always felt like a two-sided coin to me. On the one hand, it’s intimidating to know that, unlike a social-media profile, there is nothing I can hide from God. God knows those things about me that might be considered good and those things about me that are not so good. Yet, on the other hand, there is a freedom and a peace that comes in contemplating the closeness or intimacy of being fully recognized, loved, and accepted — at times in spite of my less-than-perfect self. Because God cannot be fooled by the appearances we present to the world, we can take comfort in knowing that we are truly loved completely and without limit for who we really are and not what we pretend or wish to be. When considering this intimacy with God we might also recognize the challenge to live more authentically as ourselves created to love, forgive, and reflect the image and likeness of the Creator.

This lifelong, intimate and, at times, challenging relationship with God is not always understood or realized right away. Like any significant relationship, our connection with God is perhaps best described as a lifelong journey of discovery. As the Trappist monk and author Thomas Merton says in his book *New Seeds of Contemplation*, it is in discovering God that we come to discover our true selves. Because it is only through our intimate journey of relationship with God that we come to understand our own identity, our connection with God is the cornerstone and foundation of all of our relationships. Not only is God responsible for bringing each aspect of creation into existence and sustaining that reality, but every authentic relationship we share is also rooted in and made possible our primary relationship with God; whether we are conscious of this or not. In order to truly know another I must also know myself, and to truly know myself I must first know God.

At the heart of the Franciscan tradition stands the primacy of relationship. St. Francis of Assisi eschewed the traditional forms of religious life in his day that kept women and men in consecrated life away from the rest of society within a cloister. Instead, St. Francis desired that the world be his cloister and that nothing should get in the way of his relationship with others. This was, after all, the example Jesus Christ set out for his followers according to the Gospels: no one should be turned away.

St. Francis intuited the significance of intimate relationships as the centerpiece of the spiritual life. He wished to be as aware of God’s closeness to him as possible while striving to follow in the footsteps of Christ. This opened his eyes to the world around him, which included women and men that his privileged upbringing allowed him to ignore previously. He would embrace those people thought to be un-embraceable and love those that no one else dared to love: the poor, the sick, the forgotten, the outcast. Like Christ who always identified the will of God as the source of his mission, St. Francis lived his vocation of solidarity and service to others according to a life of prayer and humility, which continually reminded him that God was the primary source and ultimate goal of all he did.

As a Franciscan friar, I am able to look at the path that St. Francis has laid before all of us. It is an intimate journey of relationship with God that necessarily spills over into every other relationship we have. It challenges me to recognize my inherent connection to the entire created order that extends far beyond the boundaries of our human family to include the rest of creation. It calls me forward to focus on the ways I can reconnect with my Creator again and again to renew my awareness of the most intimate relationship in my life, a relationship that grounds and sustains all others.

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THE INTIMATE JOURNEY OF RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

“Mental prayer, in my opinion, is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends: it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us.” —Saint Teresa of Avila

Summary
Father Daniel Horan, OFM, reflects on the reality that the most intimate relationship that a human being has is with God, who is there from our beginning and will be there for us forever. As with other relationships, cultivating intimacy with God requires communication, vulnerability, and comfort with being fully seen, known, and loved. Horan says that knowledge and love of God requires knowledge and love of oneself. When it comes to this relationship, God always extends the first invitation; it is up to us to respond.

Questions for Conversation
1. Every intimate relationship requires a level of commitment on the part of two people. Prayer is one of the most important ways that we can strengthen our relationship with God. What kinds of prayer help you cultivate this relationship? Do frequency, location, and circumstances help facilitate your connection?
2. How would you characterize your relationship with God today? How has that relationship changed over the course of your life?
3. In the Catholic faith, God is described as father, son, friend, brother, counselor, and advocate. God is even described in the Bible with maternal qualities. What kind of human relationship most mirrors your relationship with God? Does it vary?
The Biblical phrase, “If today you hear his voice,” implies that the divine voice must somehow be accessible in our daily experience, for this verse expresses a conviction central to Hebrew and Christian faith, that we live a life in dialogue with God. We are creatures who live one day at a time. If God wants to communicate with us, it has to happen in the course of a 24-hour day, for we live in no other time. And how do we go about this kind of listening? Long tradition has provided a helpful tool, which we call the examination of consciousness today. “Rummaging for God” is an expression that suggests going through a drawer full of stuff, feeling around, looking for something that you are sure must be in there somewhere. I think that image catches some of the feel of what is classically known in Church language as the prayer of “examen.”

The Examen, or examination of conscience, is an ancient practice in the Church. In fact, even before Christianity, the Pythagoreans and the Stoics promoted a version of the practice. It is what most of us Catholics were taught to do to prepare for Confession. In that form, the Examen was a matter of examining one’s life in terms of the Ten Commandments to see how daily behavior stacked up against those divine criteria. St. Ignatius includes it as one of the exercises in his manual, *The Spiritual Exercises*.

It is still a salutary thing to do but wears thin as a lifelong, daily practice. It is hard to motivate yourself to keep searching your experience for how you sinned. In recent decades, spiritual writers have worked with the implication that conscience in Romance languages like French (conscience) and Spanish (conciencia) means more than our English word “conscience,” in the sense of moral awareness and judgment; it also means “consciousness.”

Now prayer that deals with the full contents of...
your consciousness lets you cast your net much more broadly than prayer that limits itself to the contents of conscience, or moral awareness. A number of people—most famously, George Aschenbrenner, S.J., in a classic article for Review for Religious in 1971—have developed this idea in profoundly practical ways. I wish to propose a way of doing the Examen, as an approach in five steps:

1. Pray for light. Since we are not simply daydreaming or reminiscing but rather looking for some sense of how the Spirit of God is leading us, it only makes sense to pray for some illumination. The goal is not simply memory but graced understanding. That’s a gift from God devoutly to be begged. “Lord, help me understand this blooming, buzzing confusion.”

2. Review the day in thanksgiving. Note how different this is from looking immediately for your sins. Nobody likes to poke around in the memory bank to uncover smallness, weakness, lack of generosity. But everybody likes to savor beautiful gifts, and that is precisely what the past 24 hours contain—gifts of existence, work, relationships, food, challenges. Gratitude is the foundation of our whole relationship with God. So use whatever cues help you to walk through the day from the moment of awakening—even the dreams you recall upon awakening. Walk through the past 24 hours, from hour to hour, from place to place, task to task, person to person, thanking the Lord for every gift you encounter.

3. Review the feelings that surface in the replay of the day. Our feelings, positive and negative, the painful and the pleasing, are clear signals of where the action was during the day. Simply pay attention to any and all of those feelings as they surface, the whole range: delight, boredom, fear, anticipation, resentment, anger, peace, contentment, impatience, desire, hope, regret, shame, uncertainty, compassion, disgust, gratitude, pride, rage, doubt, confidence, admiration, shyness—whatever was there. Some of us may be hesitant to focus on feelings in this over-psychologized age, but I believe that these feelings are the liveliest index to what is happening in our lives. This leads us to the fourth moment.

4. Choose one of those feelings (positive or negative) and pray from it. That is, choose the remembered feeling that most caught your attention. The feeling is a sign that something important was going on. Now simply express spontaneously the prayer that surfaces as you attend to the source of the feeling—praise, petition, contrition, cry for help or healing, whatever.

5. Look toward tomorrow. Using your appointment calendar if that helps, face your immediate future. What feelings surface as you look at the tasks, meetings, and appointments that face you? Fear? Delighted anticipation? Self-doubt? Temptation to procrastinate? Zestful planning? Regret? Weakness? Whatever it is, turn it into prayer—for help, for healing, whatever comes spontaneously. To round off the examen, say the Lord’s Prayer. If we are to listen for the God who creates and sustains us, we need to take seriously and prayerfully the meeting between the creatures we are and all else that God holds lovingly in existence. That “interface” is the felt experience of our days. It deserves prayerful attention. It is a big part of how we know and respond to God.

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THE EXAMEN

“Prayer is not asking. Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God, at His disposition, and listening to His voice in the depth of our hearts.”
—Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta

Summary
Dennis Hamm, S.J., offers a reflection on the history of the Examen and walks the reader through the method of this ancient prayer practice. While Catholics generally use this to prepare for Confession, St. Ignatius’s method can be used as a daily check-in with God and with oneself. Beginning with a prayer of illumination and thanksgiving, the person praying reflects on his or her day with gratitude and the emotions that are elicited in response. Taking time to pray with these emotions in mind allows for contemplation and consideration of how to approach the events of tomorrow.

Questions for Conversation
1. St. Ignatius’s Examen is based on the principle that deeper knowledge of yourself leads to deeper knowledge and love of God (and vice versa). Can you describe an experience or time in your life when this was true for you?
2. One of the conditions for self-reflection and listening to God’s voice is creating time and space for silence. This can be a challenge today. What are the opportunities in your daily or weekly schedule for quiet reflection or stillness? What might it take to introduce small windows of silence into your work or family life?
3. If you can only make time to introduce one part of the Examen into your daily routine, which do you think would be the most helpful and why?
GATHERING PRAYER

Be With Us Today
St. Thomas More (1478-1535)

Father in heaven,
you have given us a mind to know you,
a will to serve you,
and a heart to love you.
Be with us today in all that we do,
so that your light may shine out in our lives.
Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

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This program is sponsored by Boston College’s Church in the 21st Century Center, a catalyst and a resource for the renewal of the Catholic Church.

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