Discussion Questions: *My Sisters the Saints*
Colleen Carroll Campbell

Chapter 1: Party Girl
"If this is liberation, why am I so miserable?"

1. "It bothered me that so many theorists we read succumbed to one of two extremes: Either they allowed their insistence on the equality of men and women to obscure the differences between the sexes, or they allowed their emphasis on the differences between the sexes to obscure the equality of men and women" (6).

Here, Colleen is dissatisfied with the tenets of feminism but also with attitudes that devalue women in the name of traditionalism. Do you agree? Do you think it's possible to find a more balanced approach within our modern culture, rather than falling to one of two extremes?

2. "As for differences between the sexes, I always sensed that they existed but avoided acknowledging them aloud, lest that acknowledgment be perceived as a sign of weakness or an excuse for underachievement" (5).

Does it ring true for you that modern women feel this pressure, a high burden placed upon them to fulfill both women's roles *and* men's roles, in the name of proclaiming their strength and independence? How do we find a balance, so that we avoid undervaluing women as was more common in the past, and yet not place undue stress upon them to fulfill some societal concept of "woman," rather than listening to their individual vocation? As a woman, do you feel that you are "allowed" to admit that you are human and can't "do it all"? Do you think that this dynamic affects men's sense of self-worth and concept of their role in society? Do you think men hear a message from radical feminists that they are not needed and that women can live without them?

3. "There were no names for such romantic entanglements, no rules of engagement, and most of the time my friends and I had no idea what to make of the men in our lives. We were unconstrained by customs of courtship or social norms. We could do whatever we wanted. Yet the awkwardness, confusion, and disappointment that marked our encounters with men made me wonder: Was our unfettered freedom just a trap in disguise?" (3).

How does ambiguity and the lack of defined roles or a formal script affect the modern dating culture? How has it been affected by feminism—from both a woman's perspective and a man's perspective? Do you think it's true that new freedoms for women have created confusion, timidity, and cheap substitutes for real, meaningful relationships? How might we go about writing a new script for dating that respects the dignity of both men and women?

4. "I was fond of everything to do with the religious life … but I could not bear anything which seemed to make me ridiculous. I delighted in being thought well of" (15).

”I knew that on a Catholic college campus like mine, having a little faith was commendable. But having too much—the sort that led you to dump perfectly good boyfriends, spend your lunch breaks at noon Mass, or take controversial church teachings too seriously—was a recipe for social isolation or at least ridicule. Better to be labeled shallow, stuck-up, drunk, or debauched- anything but devout” (22).

St. Teresa of Avila warns us of the dangers of a lukewarm faith. Have you ever grown complacent in your faith? Can you identify with this sort of “dual existence, yearning for God yet clinging to the worldly pleasures, people-pleasing habits, and shallow conversations that kept him at a distance” (16)? Do you ever feel as though you’re living in two worlds, caught between cultural norms and your faith?

5. ”I had assumed that my bold if badly executed act of obedience to God’s will would result in a shower of blessings. Instead, I received some devastating family news shortly afterward that left me reeling with sadness” (23).
“‘Lord, if this is how you treat your friends,’ she quipped to Jesus, ‘no wonder you have so few!’” (23).

Have you ever experienced a time when your attempts to grow closer to God were followed by an increase in suffering? How did you respond, and what did you learn from your experiences?

6. ”Teresa’s squandered youth and stumbles on the path to sanctity reminded me that no matter how much time I had wasted in starting my interior journey, it’s never too late to take the first step” (24).
“The distracted, vain woman who spent the first four decades of her life obsessed with looking good in the eyes of others evolved into a spiritual powerhouse” (19).

This idea—that it is never too late to turn toward God—is at the heart of Teresa’s message. Have you found this to be true in your own life? Do you ever have trouble believing it might be true for you?

Chapter 2: A Child Again
“Jesus cares more about the love we put into our acts than the acts themselves.”

1. “She had come to see Thérèse as ‘the saint we need,’ one whose childlike simplicity and love of God made her uniquely suited to challenge the hopelessness and powerlessness that modern believers feel when confronted with life’s trials and the world’s ills. In a technological society obsessed with rationality, efficiency, and productivity, Dorothy said, Thérèse is a reminder that the human person’s highest calling is love: ‘She speaks to our condition. Is the atom a small thing? And yet what havoc it has wrought. Is her little way a small contribution to the life of the spirit? It has all the power of the spirit of Christianity behind it. It is an explosive force that can transform our lives and the life of the world, once put into effect’” (32).

St. Thérèse shows us that in life, it is not breadth of experience that matters but rather depth of experience. How does this contrast with the prevailing modern worldview? Thérèse had aspirations of becoming a missionary which went unfulfilled before her death; instead, she lived a private life that was unremarkable on the surface. Why has this ordinary life been so celebrated within the Church? Where do we find the meaning in a person’s life if not through great deeds and impressive achievements?

2. "I wanted to find an elevator which would raise me to Jesus, for I am too small to climb the rough stairway of perfection" (34).

How does St. Thérèse's example of humility compare with your own experiences? Have you ever felt discouraged in the spiritual life the way Thérèse was? Also, why is it that Thérèse strove for childlike faith in God? What qualities do children possess that are essential to faith?

3. "Thérèse's little way was not about telling herself or God that such irritations didn't bother her or faking feelings she didn't have. Her sensitive nature was precisely what made her acts of kindness and patience a sacrifice" (35).

How have you been challenged by God to work against your natural tendencies and do good? Are there small sacrifices you can make throughout your day as offerings to God, as Thérèse did?

4. "I started to see Dad in a new light, as a sort of spiritual beacon whose inability to comprehend the details of my daily life—or, for that matter, his own—had freed him to focus on eternal truths" (48).
"I typically left those visits with a surprising lightness in my chest and the conviction that in seeing my vulnerable and childlike father, I had glimpsed God's love in the flesh" (49).
"On most days, I still operated under the illusion that I was in control, that everything depended on my cleverness, my diligence, my merits. Dad knew better" (50).
"If what I was reading in the Gospels, learning from Thérèse, and seeing in Dad was true, then our culture has it exactly backward when treating such people as expendable. If productivity, efficiency, and rationality are not the ways God gauges a human person's value, then they are not the ways I should measure it, either. If childlike dependence on God is the mark of a great soul, then there are great souls hidden in all sorts of places where the world sees only disability, decay, and despair" (52).

Colleen recognizes how her father's struggle with Alzheimer's, while intensely difficult for her entire family, bears great fruit due to his enduring trust in God. By humbling himself, he has allowed the light of Christ to shine through. She becomes aware of how every human being, even—or especially—the sick, poor, handicapped, or marginalized, has incalculable worth. Are there any examples in your own life where you have been inspired to trust in God by someone who is patiently undergoing a great trial? Do you know someone who has shown strength through their weakness?

Chapter 3: Trust Fall
"I believed in work-life balance, but I always made my decisions with that order in mind: work, then life."

1. "Like most women in my generation, I had heard enough horror stories about feminist workaholics to know that I did not want to sacrifice my personal life at the altar of an all-consuming career. I had heard even more warnings about the other sort of sacrifice: the surrender of professional success that women

are prone to make in fits of passion or panic over their biological clocks, only to wind up dependent on unappreciative men" (58).
"I believed in work-life balance, but I always made my decisions with that order in mind: work, then life" (58).
"I could feel our love shifting the balance of my priorities, leaving me unsteady as I pondered our future. My anxiety about our competing careers mounted" (58).
"For the first time in my life, I felt sorry for my success" (65).

In your experience, is there a disparity between the way men and women approach careers? Should there be? What role should women play in the workforce? How do we ensure they receive proper respect as employees and also the respect to make career decisions that suit their individual situations? Are there solutions for flexible careers?

2. "The message of that devotion is simple: The modern world, with its inhumanity and unbelief, needs God's mercy as never before. We cannot tap into that bottomless ocean of divine love unless we ask for it. Jesus desperately wants us to ask and to trust that we will receive. 'The graces of my mercy are drawn by means of one vessel only, and that is trust,' Jesus told Faustina, according to her diary. 'The more a soul trusts, the more it will receive'" (67).
"The crucial question when it comes to faith is not 'Do I trust God?' but 'Is God trustworthy?' And the only way to answer it is by leaning into his merciful arms and letting go" (90).

Colleen realizes that it is not enough to say she trusts in God; she must act as though she does, whether or not she feels it. What's the difference? Are actions or words more important? Why?

3. "A natural-born worrier never at a loss for new material, I liked to profess confidence in God but keep plan B in my back pocket in case God let me down" (70).

Do you struggle with trusting God or worrying? Have you ever experienced a situation where God required you to put your plan B away and take a leap of faith that He will provide for you?

4. "For all my longings, though, I could not fathom how I would explain such a move to my colleagues and friends—or myself. *I'm leaving the White House to get married.* Merely mouthing the words mortified me" (77).

Do you find it difficult to hear and follow God's will for your life when you are worried about the reactions of others?

5. "I respected modern feminism's first commandment when it came to relationships: Never give up more for a man than he gives up for you" (77).
"I wanted to blame patriarchy for my conundrum, blame my job, blame John. Deep down, though, I knew something else was pulling me home. It was the force of my own desires, desires that sprang from a

soft, passionate, feminine part of me that I thought I had smothered with resumes and credentials long ago. Decades of perfectionism and compulsive achievement had not managed to kill her off. Now she was daring me to reject the smart move and take a chance on love" (79).
"To leave the White House and return home to marry John would expose me to potential humiliation: People might see my decision as retrograde and foolish or proof of my failure to make it in the big leagues. To face that threat would take both trust and humility—virtues that I knew I did not, by nature, possess" (82).

Have you ever felt the call to sacrifice something important to you for something better? How have you seen the faithfulness of God in that sacrifice?

6. "I silently, tearfully, and sometimes angrily begged God to answer the desire of my heart. I asked him to show me a win-win move that could release me from my dilemma. If an escape from this difficult choice were not possible and my longing to return home came from God, I reasoned, then the least he could do was grant me a clear sign that I should act on that desire: a dynamite, unsolicited job offer in St. Louis that would make it easier to leave or an insurmountable problem in DC that would make it impossible to stay. Neither came. Stasis prevailed, at work and with John, and the neon sign I demanded did not materialize. Morning after morning, I felt a strong sense of God's presence in my life and my heart but little clarity about what I should do. It was as if God, like John, was refusing to push me toward a choice lest I later resent him for forcing my hand" (80).

Can you remember a time where you wished God would make a decision for you, or when you felt lost and demanded a sign from Heaven directing you where to go next? How did you get through it?

7. "I wondered that the longer I stayed, the more I would harden into someone who no longer found it difficult to work around the clock, jab elbows with irascible bureaucrats, and forgo the extended prayer time and heart-to-heart conversations with John that I once needed to get through the day" (83).
"I saw women who had made the opposite choice. Some had married late; many had not married at all. Some were mothers, but most were older than I hoped to be when I had children. They looked frazzled and frayed as they darted down the halls at work, barking orders on their cell phones while rushing to meetings and attempting to merge sixty-hour workweeks with motherhood" (85).

Have you ever had the experience of working in a stressful environment? How have you managed to keep your priorities in order and remember to take time for God and family when there is pressure to put work first?

8. "Had feminism changed things so much that a woman who earns a degree from Harvard before marrying at twenty-two is considered a pitiful throwback to the Dark Ages?...I probably would have been one of those interns clucking with disapproval at the bride-to-be. Now I found myself envying her courage. Married at twenty-two! With a degree from Harvard—and no immediate plans to use it in the workforce! That takes chutzpah" (84).

What is your reaction to this anecdote? Have you heard people talk this way—judging women for making the decision to stay at home? Have you been one of them? What would you think of a college-educated woman who made career sacrifices for the sake of family?

9. "Although she had shed repentant tears before, this time was different 'because I had quite lost trust in myself and was placing all my confidence in God.' Teresa told Jesus that she would not get up from the floor until he had given her the help she needed" (16).

"Although she admired such great saints as Joan of Arc and Teresa of Avila, Thérèse felt incapable of imitating their bold feats and demanding penances. She sought a spiritual path more suited to her weakness and imperfections" (34).

"More impressive to me than Faustina's visions and locutions was her trust in God. Faustina trusted quietly, steadfastly, and totally. She trusted amid intense physical suffering borne in silence, amid derision and slights from fellow nuns, amid the humiliation of hearing some to whom she confided her mystical experiences dismiss them as fabrications or evidence of mental illness" (69).
"The sight of them stirred me, and as I stood beneath the window of Faustina's humble convent cell, I marveled that this international movement to celebrate God's mercy began with one woman saying, 'Jesus, I trust in you'—and meaning it" (70).
"Reflecting on her life and words, I began to notice a connection that I had overlooked before: the link between trust and humility. It takes humility to assent to follow God even when he refuses to install floodlights on your path or tell you where it will lead. Faustina's trust was rooted in that sort of humility, a refreshingly uncommon virtue in the Beltway bubble I inhabited. Her refusal to demand answers from God or defend herself from detractors went against everything the world—and especially Washington—says about what it takes to be successful and secure" (81).

There is a theme amongst all these saints. Teresa's moment of conversion came when she placed ultimate trust in God. She felt true humility and contrition, and she entrusted her life to His care, taking a leap of faith that he would fulfill her needs. Thérèse was able to reach the heights of holiness attained by Teresa of Avila and Joan of Arc precisely because she felt so incapable of imitating them; her humility is what brought her close to God. It seemed impossible to her that she would be able to become a great saint, and yet she believed it would happen—because she put her trust in God and knew that through God all things are possible. Her entire spirituality was based on the idea of a childlike trust in God. Faustina embodies the idea of trust, through her whole life. She also shows us why trusting in God forms us into the humble souls He desires us to be. We can only become great by making ourselves small, acknowledging our weakness, and depending on God's strength.

In what ways do you identify with the experiences of Teresa, Thérèse, and Faustina? How do their examples of trust inspire you within the context of your own life?

Chapter 4: A Mother at Heart
"I never knew how much I wanted to be a mother until I realized I might not have a chance."

1. "If the ability to conceive and bear children is the defining biological fact of the female body, what did it say about me that my body had failed to fulfill this function? What did it say about my marriage to John that our union had proven fruitless? Did it mean that God had not meant for us to marry? That my return to St. Louis had been a mistake? That the supernatural nudges I had felt in recent years—to focus more on family and less on work—had been illusions?" (98–99).

"Why had God given me these maternal desires if he never intended to fulfill them?" (101).

Colleen goes through an experience where her expectations and plans for her life are turned upside down, and she begins to doubt all the steps that brought her to this point. Have you ever hit a roadblock in your plans, and if so, how did you react?

2. "Every woman is called to be a mother, the pope says, but there is more than one way to answer that call" (103).

"This inborn orientation to be a companion to another and to nurture another's physical, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual growth can be fulfilled most obviously through marriage and motherhood, Edith says, but also through the consecrated life and self-giving work in the world" (106).

"I realized that there is nothing second-rate about spiritual motherhood. It is a powerful channel of God's love in a love-starved world, one all the more potent when it springs from trials you do not choose" (117).

"Aside from Mary, the mother of Jesus, I could hardly think of three women I admired more. And the realization hit me with sudden force: Not one of them had borne biological children. Not one had been a mother in the conventional sense, the sense that I once thought I had to be a mother in order to 'count' in the church and the world. Yet there they were, radiantly holy and beloved by countless spiritual children throughout the world, including me. Each had fulfilled, in her own way, what Edith described as the highest call of every mother: to nurture the spark of divine life in another's soul" (127).

How do you act as a mother in your own life, even if you are not a biological mother? Are there any women in your life who give strong examples of spiritual motherhood without having biological children?

3. "Although Edith believed that men and women share the same basic human traits and eternal destiny, she saw significant differences in the way they relate to God, the world, and their own bodies. She considered it crucial that a woman understand her distinctively feminine nature in order to live in harmony with it" (105).

"John could shake off the monthly disappointments more quickly than I could, losing himself in his work and keeping our infertility troubles quarantined from the rest of life. For me, the problem pervaded my consciousness. As I monitored my body's daily fertility signs, felt my spirits rise and fall with each hormone fluctuation, planned my days around my debilitating cramps and frequent doctors' visits,

offered my arms as pincushions to an ever-changing cast of phlebotomists, and served as ground zero for nearly every treatment that we pursued, regardless of what problem the doctors suspected was causing our troubles, I felt keenly the burden that comes from being not just a childless person but a childless woman" (99).

"Edith believed that women possess a more holistic outlook on life than men, partly because they are bound more closely to their bodies through their menstrual cycles, pregnancy, and the physical demands of motherhood, which make them less likely to lose themselves in abstraction. Edith says that women tend to pay more attention to persons than to things, to relationships and the concrete reality of people's lives than to theories, and to the whole truth of a person or situation than to an analysis of its parts" (107).

As a woman, how does your awareness of your body differ from that of a man? Do you think that your shifting hormones and cycles make you more attuned to the details of the physical world (for better or for worse)? How does the physical aspect of being a woman affect your perspective of the world and your place in it?

4. "I cringed when the speaker began by congratulating her audience on choosing the season's hottest new pastel-colored flouncy skirts and pumps over dark hues and pants, a sure sign that they cherished their femininity. There I was at the head table, sporting a five-year-old black pantsuit with dowdy flats and feeling like Bella Abzug trapped at a Tupperware party" (101).

"Yet Edith acknowledges that the tendencies she describes vary according to individuals, with some men manifesting inclinations ascribed to women more than some women do and vice versa. She does not believe that a woman's person-focused outlook limits her to working in the so-called "helping professions" or that all women must marry and bear children. Edith herself pursued a challenging scholarly career in a field dominated by men and lived for decades as a single woman in the world, before entering the convent and embracing a martyr's death" (108).

"I paid particular attention to John Paul's emphasis on the concept of spiritual maternity, the idea that women harbor a natural inclination to welcome the human person and to 'see persons with their hearts . . . independently of various ideological or political systems . . . in their greatness and limitations.' The pope describes this person-centered, maternal character of a woman's heart as the essence of true femininity. This struck me as a refreshingly substantive definition of femininity, far more appealing than the frilly-and-sassy stereotype so common at women's conferences and in the women's spirituality aisle of most bookstores (102–103).

Too often, femininity is defined in a way that is much too narrow and relies on stereotypes. A woman who doesn't embrace floral skirts, chick flicks, or the color pink is not any less of a woman, and if that's how we define femininity, it's pretty weak. Edith and John Paul present a more substantive definition of femininity that women can embrace and be proud of, regardless of their individual characteristics and preferences. There is a difference between noticing which external characteristics happen to be more commonly found in women or in men, which vary from person to person, vs. recognizing the very nature

of womanhood. What do you think it means to be feminine? Have you ever felt out of place, like you didn't match up to what our culture expects a woman to look like or act like?

5. "For men, Edith believes, this passage hints at two sins to which they are especially prone: the domination of women and obsession with work. Edith argues that sin turns a man's drive for achievement into a disordered desire for perfection that can degrade both man and his surroundings" (109–110).

"For women, Edith considers telling the reference to a woman's 'urge' for the husband who would be her 'master.' It suggests that while men are more tempted to make work or money their god, women are prone to making idols out of other people and relationships. A woman's natural focus on persons can metastasize into nosiness and gossip, Edith says, 'a perverse desire to penetrate into personal lives, a passion of wanting to confiscate people.' Her attentiveness to loved ones can lead to smothering and a 'false pursuit of prestige' that drives her to stake her self-worth on the success of her husband or children. Her desire to serve others can tempt her to take on too much and fail to meet her primary responsibilities or distinguish her own identity from those she serves" (110).

"Sin can warp the gifts that dispose a woman toward intimacy with God and with others. Her heightened sensitivity can devolve into touchiness and sentimentality. The natural unity between body and soul that orients her toward a holistic faith and awareness of what's happening inside her can lapse into a fixation on creature comforts and mindless pleasure seeking. Even her knack for balancing diverse interests and duties can degenerate, Edith says, into 'a perverted desire for totality and inclusiveness, a mania to know everything and thereby to skim the surface of everything and to plunge deeply into nothing'" (110–111).

"In each case, a woman's longing for God's infinite love has been misdirected to human beings, with disastrous results" (111).

Edith identified pitfalls that men and women are prone to fall into, based on their natural tendencies. As a woman, do you ever struggle with making idols out of relationships, indulging in gossip, serving others to the point of forgetting your own needs, or paying too much attention to how you and your loved ones are perceived in the eyes of others? How do you recognize these bad habits and reorder your priorities?

6. "Edith suggests two remedies for a woman who finds herself falling into this trap. The first is what she calls 'thoroughly objective work,' which consists of anything from sweeping the kitchen floor to balancing a budget or researching a term paper. Such work forces a woman to submit to laws outside herself, helps her escape her obsessive focus on herself and her own emotions, and encourages her to develop self-control, an important discipline for the spiritual life. The second remedy is even more crucial: structuring one's days in a way that opens doors to God's grace" (111).

"Genuine spiritual motherhood lies in leading others to freedom, not dependence; in giving, not getting. But a woman cannot give what she does not first possess. Only in loving union with God can she find the strength and selflessness she needs to be a true spiritual mother. A woman's craving for God's love is not

a weakness, Edith says. It is her greatest strength: 'The *intrinsic value of woman* consists essentially in *exceptional receptivity for God's work in her soul*'" (112–113).

"The strategies Edith suggested for coping with trails made more sense. I knew from experience that turning my mind to work helped when I found myself mired in self-pity, provided I maintained the balance between prayer, work, and rest that Edith advocated" (114).

Here, Edith gives practical advice for women seeking to avoid the pitfalls she presented earlier: 'objective work' and prayer. In your experience, do these things help you to refocus on what's important? Has there ever been a time when working on something practical has helped you get out of your own head and pay attention to the world around you? Also, what prayer habits have helped you in the past to put God first?

7. "Then she told him that she had returned to see him because, she said, 'it's time for you to make me another baby.' Her words made me flinch. I thought: Isn't God the author of life? Isn't it wrong to think of a baby as a product to be manufactured to your specifications and on your timetable, rather than a gift to be received from the hands of the Creator?" (118).

"Reproductive technologies that had begun as a means of alleviating the suffering of infertile adults had led to the increasing objectification of their unborn children" (120).

"Although pregnancy might be within reach with IVF, it would come at the cost of the deep, underlying peace that had pervaded my life and my marriage amid the most tempestuous trials—the peace of living in harmony with John, my own conscience, and what I thought God wanted of me" (124).

Today's technologies can make it all the more difficult to trust in God, with the temptation of believing we can control the gift of life. Do you think the idea of made-to-order babies, of thinking of life as a commodity, presents a danger for our culture and society? Did this chapter affect your thinking on the topic?

Here, Colleen's convictions are tested. Have you ever faced a time when following the Church's teaching proved to be difficult? How did you deal with it, and how did it shape your trust in God and in His Church?

Chapter 5: Into the Darkness
"If I had to choose one element of the Catholic faith that Dad emphasized more than any other as I was growing up, it might be this: the belief that God does not abandon us in our suffering but uses suffering to draw us closer to him."

1. "Most of his caregivers seemed to mistake his dementia for deafness, shouting orders at Dad when he failed to follow spoken commands. Some barely talked to him at all, assuming, as I heard one mutter as I was leaving his room, that creating a pleasant environment for Dad 'doesn't matter because he doesn't know where he is anyway'" (131).

"I felt as if I were standing along the road to Calvary, watching my father stumble up the mountainside toward a final agony that I did not want to watch but knew I must" (137).

Colleen's grief over her father's illness is amplified by the fact that others do not see the value of his life, while she understands how precious it is. Christ Himself was abused and overlooked by so many during His Passion. When we feel abandoned or ignored, how can we unite our sufferings to those of Christ?

2. "I first read the writings of this sixteenth-century Carmelite priest and friend of Teresa of Avila at age twenty-two. Flush with a new convert's enthusiasm and unnerved by the thought that my beginner's spiritual highs would not last forever, I quickly tucked them out of sight" (140).

"Many people quit or become stalled before they reach that point, however, frustrated at the loss of the pleasant spiritual feelings and external rewards that first attracted them to following Christ" (144).

"John said that just as Jesus achieved his greatest saving work through his sacrifice on the cross, amid feelings of abandonment by his heavenly father, so a follower of Jesus reaches the greatest degree of union with God is when he is 'brought to nothing and thoroughly humbled.' Few Christians are willing to enter into this 'supreme nakedness and emptiness of spirit' that comes on the path toward union with Christ, John said. Upon taking their first taste of interior desolation, most 'run from it as from death' and go back trying to indulge their 'spiritual sweet tooth'" (140).

"I knew Jesus was there. I believed in his Eucharistic presence as much as ever. But I felt none of the warm waves of consolation that used to come in his presence, only periodic flashes of despair about my future or irritation at my rosary-rattling, denture-clicking, page-rustling fellow adorers" (159).

Colleen discovers that her relationship with God cannot depend on the good feelings she receives from prayer or from the praise she receives from others—it is easy to be faithful to God when it feels good and we get something out of it, but if that's the only thing that brings us to prayer, then we're not doing it out of love for God Himself. By showing up even when it's difficult and painful, Colleen's faith is deepened in a new and different way. How have you dealt with difficult periods in your life when it becomes difficult to pray? How have you fought to keep your faith when tested?

3. "If I had to choose one element of the Catholic faith that Dad emphasized more than any other as I was growing up, it might be this: the belief that God does not abandon us in our suffering but uses suffering to draw us closer to him" (137–138).

"True dark nights of the spirit are rare, but periods of desolation and suffering are par for the spiritual course" (143).

"John of the Cross saw the spiritual life as a gradual and often painful process of letting go of all that is not God. Souls already purged of obvious sins may find God leading them through four increasingly intense 'nights' to purify them of hidden sins and attachments and bring them into closer union with himself" (143).

"'The closer you get, the more you're going to be suffering,' he answered. 'But the focus is not on the suffering. The focus and the important thing is the love with which that suffering is accepted and lived'" (145).

"But her tortured missives helped me realize that I was experiencing shades of what mystics like John of the Cross describe as the darkness of faith: the challenge of clinging to Christ when it feels as if he has forgotten you" (164–165).

St. John of the Cross writes about the "dark night of the soul," the idea that God asks us to undergo periods of interior dryness and suffering in order to refine our souls and purify us of attachments to things other than God. Does St. John's writing resonate with your own experience?

4. "Like nearly everyone who admired Mother Teresa, I once had assumed that her interior life consisted of rapturous, soul-swelling prayer" (142).

"She was the very picture of serene if unattainable sanctity. Surely, her spiritual life had brimmed with consolations. Discovering that it was riddled with desolation instead did not shake my confidence that Mother Teresa was a holy woman" (142–143).

"Mother Teresa's steadfast prayer life and confidence in the reality of redemptive suffering allowed her to confront her own interior darkness armed with the conviction that her pain could glorify God" (144).

"What little I had read had unnerved me, just as John of the Cross's writings had a decade earlier. If someone as saintly as Mother Teresa felt forsaken by God and overwhelmed by her suffering, what hope was there for the rest of us?" (145).

"I could not help but be humbled by the vast chasm between the heroic, joyful way Mother Teresa had carried her cross and the halfhearted, resentful way I was carrying mine" (164).

Were you surprised to learn the background of Mother Teresa's spiritual life and her inner anguish? Did it inspire you or intimidate you?

5. "Now there would be no more winks, no more songs, no more hugs. There would be no more Dad—at least, not the way I had known him—this side of eternity" (153).

"Jesus wept because death is a horror—every death, even the death of a good man, even the death of someone on his way back to God. Jesus wept because death, like Alzheimer's and infertility, was never what he wanted for us. It was not part of God's original plan. Jesus saved us from death's finality; he brings greater good out of its pain; but death still horrifies us because that's the very nature of death: horrifying" (154).

While we always have hope even in death, because we know that death is not the end for us, it is still immeasurably traumatic to experience. God shares in our sorrow because he so values human life and weeps at the pain caused by the death of every human soul. Does this idea bring comfort to you? How does this knowledge help you grapple with the tragedy of death?

6. "'I can accept the cross of never having children,' I told my mother once. 'It's the waiting, the not knowing, that's driving me crazy.' 'The waiting is the cross,' she answered" (165).

"Maybe that was the truth I had overlooked all these years: that the waiting, the not knowing, even the interior desolation and doubts—*that* was the suffering that Jesus wanted me to offer up to him" (165–166).

"I had wanted to analyze and dissect my cross, to know how long I would have to carry it and how my carrying it would glorify God. Like a groggy patient fighting to sit upright amid her operation so she can monitor her surgeon's progress, I wanted to stand outside my suffering and scrutinize God's work in my soul as he accomplished it" (166).

"'Sometimes we have to wait for people,' he said in the hushed voice he reserved for his most important declarations. 'But while we wait, we get better'" (133).

It can be so, so difficult to accept a trial that we are being asked to undergo without knowing why—but that act of trust is an even greater opportunity to demonstrate our trust in God. We are uncomfortable not knowing the details, but we trust that God knows what is best for us and would not conceal His plan unless it was for our good. Has there been a time in your life when you struggled to let God be in control?

7. "That style of one-foot-in-front-of-the-other spirituality had never much appealed to me. It seemed too simplistic for the deep-thinking Christian I considered myself to be. But day after day, as I soaked up Mother Teresa's words in that chapel and stared at that silent host, I grew in my conviction that such simple perseverance might just be the essence of authentic faith: showing up to pray when you feel nothing, continuing to confide in God when he answers you with silence, loving and serving him even after you accept that he may never give you what you so desperately want or answer the question that confounds you the most" (166).

"One phrase kept coming back to me as that fall faded into winter: God is God, and I am not. After years of pretending to believe that truth, I finally felt it sinking into my bones. I cannot control God. I cannot predict God. I cannot force God to do what I want or explain why he has not done what I want" (167).

"How liberating it must be to stop evading, questioning, or complaining about your trials and start embracing them as opportunities to draw closer to God, to realize that even if Jesus is all you have, he is enough" (168).

How do you find a balance between seeking knowledge about God and understanding more about where He is leading you, versus maintaining a childlike trust in Him and accepting that you will never know the reasons for everything that happens in your life? It is easy to get wrapped up in wanting to know every detail, but how can we keep aware of the fact that we can't always see the big picture? That every experience we're given is a chance to grow closer to God—even if it's not what we wanted to happen?

Chapter Six: Triumph of the Cross
"This is your mother; this is your perfect mother you long to have and to be."

1. "Turning to Mary had not always been easy for John or me. As a Protestant, John grew up regarding Marian devotion as odd and unbiblical. He changed his mind in his twenties, as his study of scripture and church tradition and his own prayer experiences convinced him to embrace the Catholic faith and Mary's role in it. My esteem for Mary grew more gradually, after decades spent alternately ignoring her, fearing her intrusion, and fleeing to her for help" (182–183).

"On the one hand, I knew that Catholic tradition always has encouraged great reverence for Mary and I felt a natural affection for her. On the other, I feared focusing on her too much lest I become one of those retrograde, "pre–Vatican II" Catholics who elevates Mary to a place that belongs to Jesus alone" (183).

"We popped into a historic cathedral for a visit, and I pulled out a pamphlet on Mary that I had picked up somewhere along the way. As I cracked it open, my friend asked why I was bothering with Mary when I could focus solely on Jesus. I fell mute, not knowing how to answer" (184).

"The progression that the council fathers described—from a sentimental, almost magical view of Mary to genuine affection, admiration, and a desire to imitate her virtues—slowly unfolded in my life as I learned more about Mary's role in salvation history" (186).

Has your view of Mary changed in any way throughout your life? Have you ever had any misconceptions about the veneration of Mary, and how do you relate to her now? Have you encountered misunderstandings about Mary from non-Catholics? How do you respond?

2. "In a mass-media culture that equates influence with verbosity and visibility, it's tempting to look at Mary's low profile in scripture and conclude that she is little more than a bit player in the divine drama" (187).

"Mary's self-emptying act of saying 'yes' to God at the Annunciation—and her acceptance of all the suffering and social peril that 'yes' would entail for a young woman in her situation—was the culmination of a long biblical tradition of faithful women finding fulfillment by surrendering to God's surprising will" (189).

"To bear the 'son' includes the surrender of oneself into barrenness" (189).

"Her complete consecration to God confirms the value and importance of women for their own sakes, even apart from their ability to provide sexual pleasure or large numbers of heirs to men. As Edith Stein puts it, the ideal of Christian virginity embodied in Mary presents a 'basic change in the status of woman' affecting all women, whether single, consecrated, or married. Marriage and motherhood are no longer the only ways a woman can serve God, Edith says, and even for those who choose marriage and motherhood, Mary's total gift of self to God amid motherhood reminds them that their first priority is fidelity to God" (190).

Mary's life goes against the grain of what is normally celebrated in our modern culture. She resisted a self-centered life and surrendered her will to God's, which brought a great deal of suffering during her life but allowed for our redemption to be carried out. How does her model inspire you in your own life, to live for the sake of God and for others?

3. "With all her unique privileges, Mary sometimes can seem too remote to understand our messy lives. How can you relate to someone who never violated God's will even in the slightest matter and already lives in body-soul bliss with God?" (195).

"In my struggles with these questions, I found it surprising and somewhat reassuring to discover how many theologians believe Mary had it tougher than the rest of us, because her sinless nature made living in our sinful world especially painful. Like Jesus, Mary probably approached the world with acute sensitivity, alert to both the tiniest whispers of God's voice and the slightest suffering in the lives of others. The casual cruelties and everyday injustices we inflict without thinking probably disturbed Mary more than they would someone with a calloused, sin-hardened soul" (195).

"And although her holiness sometimes intimidated me, I found myself increasingly attracted to her—not simply as a model but as a mother" (196).

In light of our own sinfulness, Mary can seem so unlike us, since she is a model of virtue. But part of Mary's virtue includes a wholehearted sensitivity to our own struggles and devoted care for us. Have you ever found it difficult to relate to Mary?

4. "Of all her gifts, Mary's contemplative approach to life—her habit of prayerfully pondering life's joys and sorrows in her heart—surprised and challenged me the most" (196).

"Mary reminded me of another truth: that a woman's greatest strength comes from silent communion with God, and sometimes the most radical thing she can do is not rant and rave but watch and pray" (196).

Mary's example reminds us to slow down and focus not so much on our accomplishments but more on our intentions, not on voicing our own opinions but on listening to others. Does Mary's example of silent reflection relate to you in your own life? Have there been times when you found it helpful to take time to be quiet and ponder the events of your life, instead of jumping to action right away?

5. "I remember marveling as I sat in the pew near the altar how much closer my mother and I were than she was to her mother, yet even our relationship had its share of sticky, unresolved issues. I thought of how my relationship with my own children would be: probably loving and close but still marked by some discord and disappointment, most of it stemming from mistakes I would make as a mother. How wonderful it would be if I could be a perfect mother, a completely flawless, selfless nurturer whose loving guidance never erred" (197).

"*This is your mother; this is your perfect mother you long to have and to be.* I realized that Mary was as real a mother to me as the one who bore me in her womb, and that she loved me with the same fierce, fathomless love that any good mother feels for her child—a love all the more powerful because it stems from her uniquely pure maternal heart" (197).

Our human relationships always fall short of what we hope they could be, but Mary can fill the role of a perfect mother in our lives if we open ourselves up to her, and she can help us to be more forgiving of each others' faults. It is easy to be disappointed in how others have failed us, but does it help you to remember that you are flawed as well and also in need of forgiveness? How can Mary's loving forgiveness of your faults help you to forgive others?

6. "Mary may have been the perfect mother, but little about her earthly experience of motherhood was perfect" (202).

"This is why the Doctors [of the Church] tell us, referring to Mary's immense love, that she would have made a ladder of her very self to put her son on the cross if there had been no other way. All this was because her son's will remained within her" (203).

"I knew I would need to resist again and again the tug toward maternal perfectionism—toward the furious insistence that my life and the lives of my children unfold the way I think best" (203–204).

"The birth, like the pregnancy and years of waiting that preceded it, had been rough. Nothing about my journey to motherhood had proceeded as planned. But we were home now. This was our family, finally, and we were home" (208).

Mary's life did not go as she might have hoped or planned. But she put the reins fully in God's hands and trusted in His will, even through the incredibly painful trials that came at Calvary. She resisted any temptation to become a controlling, overprotective mother even when her Son faced a brutal death, because she knew that God was in control and His plans were for our good, even if she couldn't fully understand them. She wanted exactly what Jesus wanted; she trusted in Him completely. Do you struggle with perfectionism and a desire for control? What helps you to overcome these tendencies and find peace with the events of your life?