

## MISSION: Prayer 10

### “How to Progress”

**Like most kids** arriving at driver's education classes in high school, I was already convinced of my ability to navigate the busy streets of my neighborhood. These classes were simply a requirement, a rite of passage I must endure before I could cruise to the movies with my buddies. Hands on the wheel at ten and two? Please! How about right hand at six, left slung out the window waving to my people. That's how I roll - or so I thought.

When it came time to finally slide into the driver's seat of a car large enough to run over a small elephant without feeling a bump, I was ready. Who cared if I could barely see over the dashboard? Let's ride! I glanced across at the guy sitting next to me and briefly wondered why there was a second brake pedal installed on the passenger side of the car. I soon found out.

In retrospect, I'm surprised he didn't scream. Instead he channeled his terror into stomping the secondary pedal as hard as he could. Large moving pieces of colored metal flashed around us. Horns assaulted the suburban silence. I could smell death - or maybe it was just exhaust. Regardless, cars were coming from everywhere, swerving at breakneck speed with drivers hurling expletives my way. (I would've shrunk down, but I could barely see to the end of the hood as it was.) We stopped, hard. The gym teacher/driver's education instructor grabbed the wheel. I don't remember exactly what he said, but it was forceful. Somehow between my feet on the gas, his on the secondary brake, and four hands on the wheel, we escaped. In the end, the only things damaged were my pride and his blood pressure.

In truth, it wasn't really fair. This particular intersection to which he subjected me is affectionately known to locals as "Suicide Circle." It's where six streets come together in one of those circular deathtraps some city planner mistakenly thought to be a bright idea. ("On this chart you can see where we'll have dozens of cars converging from multiple directions, merging, and seamlessly peeling off into different streets. Any questions?") The whole event shook me ever so slightly. Regardless, I take solace in thinking that perhaps, after a stiff drink or two in the teacher's lounge, my instructor realized that Suicide Circle plus Chicago rush hour plus new teenage driver didn't equal his best idea.

In addition to personal cathartic benefits, the point of telling you this story is that while I possessed the will to drive, I still needed to master the art of moving the machine in the right direction. All those pedals, mirrors, and steering wheel were meant to work a particular way which required knowledge and skill. I could name all the parts of the car and describe their function before I had any training, but I needed to develop some new traits and habits before cruising to the mall. Prayer works the same way. There are certain things we must master or we're not going to progress.

### *Persevere*

The most important rule of prayer is to never stop. St. Paul exhorts us to "pray constantly" (1 Thes 5:17). Jesus agrees, declaring we "ought always to pray and not lose heart" (Lk 18:1). And to drive the point home, he tells a parable about a widow who kept bugging a godless judge over and over to rule in her favor in a dispute. At first the judge refused, but eventually she drove him nuts and he caved just to get her off of his back. "Though I neither fear God nor regard man ...

I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming" (Lk 18:4-5). So if this unrighteous judge gave in, says Jesus, "will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? ... I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily" (Lk 18:7-8).

To make sure we get the message, Jesus tells another story - that of the buggiest friend in the world. This guy has the nerve to bang on his buddy's door asking for bread at midnight. Jesus says the friend in bed won't give him the bread because of their friendship, but rather because of the door-banger's annoying persistence.

The moral of these parables isn't to glorify being a pain in the keister. Rather, Jesus is basically repeating the truism that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Lk 11:9).

As a parent, I'm starting to think that all children hear these stories right before they're born. I can see it now. God cracks open the Bible and tells the babies, "Okay, let me show you how this works..." As soon as the pale, sterile glow of hospital lighting illuminates their scrunched up little faces, they've mastered the art

of perseverance. It starts with the cute cry of a newborn, but eventually morphs into wails of "Can I have this? Can I have that? I want more..." They ask over and over and over until you just can't take it anymore. Oh, the humanity! "Yes! You may have another Popsicle. Take the box. Take the whole refrigerator! In fact, here are my keys. I know you're only five years old and three years old. One of you push the pedals and the other steer; you're fast learners."

Okay, maybe I don't let them drive, but sometimes we give in because we've been worn down like the knees on an old pair of corduroy pants. But God gives in purely because of love.

Perseverance has to be based on faith and love. If we don't ever think there's a possibility it will happen, we wouldn't even ask. Regardless of my bluster, my children had to know there was at least a small chance that eventually I would cave in and get a dog. It's the same with God. But unlike me, the question isn't whether or not God will come through. He always does. The question Jesus asks at the end of the story of the persistent widow is the only unanswered part: "when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Lk 18:8). Believe in the goodness of God and trust him to answer your (persistent) prayers. But that's not all.

Don't forget that when the request is granted, we have to make full and right use of what we get so that the grace given isn't wasted. If my daughter, for example, begs me to let her stay up past bedtime because she has an assignment due, I'm willing to allow it. But if I were to catch her playing games on the computer instead of finishing her work, I'm far less inclined to say "yes" the next time she asks. Use the gifts God gives the right way and he'll continue to respond, which should lead us to humble thanks.

### ***Humility***

Humanity loves pride. We're proud of it. We glorify it. Like peacocks we flaunt beauty, intelligence, physical prowess, and anything else we can show off. We want to be recognized, and creating a name for ourselves is a life's ambition. Some of us even dream of being as big as God. Early in her career, pop singer Madonna reputedly said, "I won't be happy until I'm as famous as God."

At one point, The Beatles actually thought they were. Back in the sixties John Lennon (now deceased) famously stated, "We're more popular than Jesus." (Can you imagine that conversation at the pearly gates?)

Pride is nothing new to the story, of course. Way back in the beginning of history Adam and Eve wanted to be as big as God, too, and got booted out of Eden as a result. Satan fell to the same temptation before Adam and Eve did and had to exit heaven. Later in human history the guys building the Tower of Babel wanted it to reach heaven in yet another failed effort to make a name for themselves. It's an old story that keeps repeating itself because of sin. In fact, pride is the source of sin. And there's only one way to kick it out: humility.

If pride is the root of sin, humility is the taproot of all the virtues. It feeds the virtues so that pride can be crushed. Pride is dangerous because it basically says that we have all the answers and we're in control, not God. That's why pride kills prayer. What's the point of asking God for anything if you think you can get it yourself? Spiritual writers often emphasize the importance for beginners in the spiritual life of meditating on the fact that we are nothing. This kind of mental prayer crushes pride because it puts us in our proper place and leads to gratitude.

The humble man recognizes he is merely a creature. He knows he has no existence apart from God and happily gives himself to God's will. Ultimately, that's what the Christian life is all about, which is why the *Catechism* calls humility the "foundation of prayer" (2559). In fact, humility is so important it led St. John Chrysostom to declare that the combination of humility and sin is better than a mixture of virtue and pride. To prove his point, he invites us to consider Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the publican in Luke chapter eighteen:

One relied on his righteousness, on his own fasting and the tithes that he paid. The other needed to say only a few words to be free of all his sins. That was because God was not only listening to his words, he also saw the soul of him who spoke them, and finding it humble and contrite he judged him worthy of his compassion and love.<sup>51</sup>

Jesus closes the parable by saying, "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who

humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk 18:9-14). And Jesus didn't just tell us. He showed us. I don't know of a more striking passage in Scripture than this:

Christ Jesus ... though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. (Phil 2:5-8)

Think about that. Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity, the eternal Son of God, became like one of us, his creatures. Christ's becoming man, his incarnation, is an amazing act of love though difficult to understand. Jesus' humility led him not just to become like one of us, but to present himself to be beaten, spit upon, cursed, and finally crucified by his own creations. It's a gift of self we can barely begin to grasp. "God's positive hunger for humiliation, degradation, ignominy, is incomprehensible to our human understanding," said Archabbot Benedict Baur.

Christ's life is a prayer, an offering of self - back to the Father. He shows us the way. And if right now you're thinking, "Not only is this humility thing hard, look where it got Jesus. They killed him!" - don't forget to keep reading. The very next verse says that as a result of his humility and obedience, "God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name" (Phil 2:9). None of us, not you, not me, not The Beatles, and certainly not Madonna, will be exalted over Christ. But living a truly humble life makes us like him, which is our aim. Humility clothes us with Christ. It's the "ornament of the godhead," says Isaac of Nineveh.

Humility enables us to enter into a relationship with Jesus and participate in his divine life. It provides a direct line to God. As the Book of Sirach says, "The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds" (35:17).

In short, you can't ascend to heaven and commune with God unless you humbly lower yourself before God and men. Nothing kills the spiritual life faster than pride. Indeed, "pride goes before destruction" (Prv 16:18). It brought Adam down, and it will bring you down too, if you let it. That's why St. Teresa of Avila exhorted us to "have humility and again humility! It is by humility that the Lord allows Himself to be conquered so that He will do all we ask of Him."

## *Suffering*

As time goes by and our spiritual aptitude increases, prayer stops being something we simply check off our Catholic to-do list. It becomes a constant awareness of God's presence in our life leading us to become more and more like him. It's a perpetual movement affecting all our decisions. We begin to see Christ in every person and situation - even challenging ones.

People serious about growing closer to God know they are going to come face-to-face with the issue of suffering. They're not the only ones, of course. As we've seen, everyone has to deal with suffering in some way, shape, or form, because we all experience it.

The big difference between Catholics and everyone else is how we view and handle the pain of this life. Joined to Christ through the sacraments, beginning with baptism, we have the opportunity to offer up our sufferings in union with Jesus. It's a tremendous grace. Jesus, the "last Adam," according to Paul, took the awful consequences of the first Adam's fall - suffering and death - and made them the path of life (see 1 Cor 15:45). In other words, Jesus flipped the devil's plan upside down. Satan thought he'd won. Man had turned against God and reaped the consequences. But Jesus said, "Not so fast." Out of humility and love, and like us in every way except sin, he experienced suffering and death and made them the path to salvation (see Heb 4:15). In fact, he became human for the express purpose of suffering and dying. He knows exactly what being human feels like in every respect (minus sin). Don't think God can't identify with your situation.

Christ's actions have changed everything. Now, whenever we experience difficulty of any sort, simply by saying, "Jesus, I offer this suffering up to you," we become an instrument of grace for ourselves and others. He gives us the power to help out the rest of his Body, our family members. For this reason St. Paul exclaimed, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church" (Col 1:24).

Because Christ wills it, we have the opportunity to participate in his work of redemption. He could do it all by himself if he chose, but he wants us to work with

him. When we suffer and offer it to God, we're acting just like Jesus Christ. This is the path to eternal life. "United with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom 6:5). Jesus himself said, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23).

This is part of the beauty of our faith. Something we're going to have to deal with one way or the other becomes a powerful weapon in our spiritual struggle. And the more you practice offering your suffering back to Christ, the more suffering begins to take on a new dimension.

As we saw while discussing the Illuminative and Unitive Ways, suffering loses its bite as we mature in the spiritual life. Not only do we come to a deeper awareness that our suffering can help others; we know we're becoming more conformed to Our Lord.

"Got it, Padre. Suffering makes me more like Christ. I'm still working on exactly how I'm not going to mind it so much, but I'll take your word for it. Let's move on. Shall we?" Not just yet, my faithful reader. There's one more aspect of suffering we need to discuss: its connection to prayer.

### ***Working It Out***

You can't separate suffering and prayer. They go together like peanut butter and jelly, Abbot and Costello, or even Hall & Oates (though I wish they'd broken up earlier). This is evident in a couple of ways. First, as we said, prayer helps us to see Christ in all situations, even those in which we suffer (which might involve listening to Hall & Oates). It prepares us to accept God's will in everything. But there's another side of it, too.

Through prayer we begin to recognize various faults and shortcomings in our lives. This happens particularly in meditation when God points out areas that need work, as discussed previously. But as any kid who watched GI Joe on TV learned, "Knowing is only half the battle." We have to do something about it. That's where the suffering comes in, especially in the form of penance.

Penance is like a workout for your spiritual body. A good friend of mine likens penance to the process of losing weight. Early in life you're young and svelte. But

then you hit middle age and suddenly around your middle there appears a spare tire. (They don't call the wheel in your trunk a "donut" for nothing.) So what do you do? Well, either you reach for another piece of cake, or you squash your desire for food and stop eating as much. You suffer a little. You go hungry. You work out. Why? In order to get stronger and healthier. It's the same with our spiritual life.

Just as in physical workouts, penance and suffering play a part in spiritual conditioning. They purge us of vices and faults. But purging isn't enough. Once we get rid of our spiritual "dead weight," we need to replace it with something better, some spiritual muscle. Saints and other spiritual writers talk a good bit about replacing our vices with virtue. That should be our prayer request so that we don't fall back into sin. We can't just spiritually fast; we have to work out, too. But even that is just part of the process.

### ***Detachment***

Unless you're a masochist, penance is not an end. It's a means. The goal of penance is detachment from the things of this world. In particular, it's getting rid of anything which spiritually drags us down or keeps us from fixing our eyes on heaven.

The name of the game in the spiritual life is gaining control over ourselves. It's paramount because as St. John Paul II said, we must fully possess ourselves before we can give ourselves away. It took me a long time to really grasp what the pope was saying in that statement. My grad-school roommate casually tossed it out in conversation one day after he'd learned it in one of his philosophy classes. I turned it over in my head quite a bit and finally concluded it's one of the most profound thoughts I've ever encountered.

John Paul II was basically saying we can't give away what we don't own. Imagine if a friend walked into your house, grabbed your nicest piece of furniture and gave it to another buddy. What would you do? (Yeah - me, too.) The pope applied this idea to the deepest parts of the person.

If we're ruled by our passions and desires, we're not in the driver's seat. We're not in control of our own selves. We're relegated to the back like a toddler strapped

into a car seat with no choice over where the vehicle travels (except when they scream). That has to change. Otherwise, we can't make a gift of ourselves to others and to God. That's the role of penance. It strengthens our ability to control our actions and not be ruled by our passions. We can put the cookie down and slowly back away. We can control our anger when someone wrongs us. We can turn the channel when the show gets steamy. In short, penance helps us detach ourselves from this world.

These days "detachment" carries some negative connotations. Unless you're intent on maintaining your bachelor status, no guy wants to be labeled as "detached." "Detachment parenting" would probably land you in jail (unless you're dealing with your thirty-year-old who won't leave the house). Not even a retina wants to be detached. Regardless, it's an idea frequently discussed by the spiritual giants of our faith.

We want to be crystal clear about this because some people totally misunderstand spiritual writers like St. John of the Cross and St. Francis de Sales on this point. They think detachment essentially means we're supposed to be robots; not loving, not happy, not sad - not human! That's not it at all. As a parent, I'm attached to my kids. As a son, I'm attached to my parents. As a music lover, I'm totally attached to the eighties. There's lots to love in this world (and not love - like Hall & Oates).

It's not that we're to be cold or indifferent to anyone and anything. On the contrary, in the beginning God created everything good. We just need to remember that as good as creation is, it's not the Creator. When human attachments begin to impede our journey toward Christ, there's a problem. We can't allow ourselves to become so fixated or closely attached that we can't let go. (Even 38 Special knew to "hold on loosely.") And this is true of everything and everyone. Christ must be first. And this can be very difficult at times.

My family was not particularly pleased when I announced I was going to become Catholic. I don't blame them. Most of them are strong Christians with deeply held beliefs, and they simply didn't agree with what I was doing. But as much as I love them, I couldn't let that love impede my move into the Church. Jesus said, "He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" (Mt 10:37). I assure you it wasn't easy, and suffering occurred on both sides. But I think they realized on

some level I was trying my best to follow where God was leading. And that's the point.

Detachment from this world doesn't mean we forsake it. I still love my family very much and enjoy visiting them when possible (except when I have to sleep on a couch). God made me a part of that family. He gave us the good of this world for our enjoyment. But we have to make sure our priorities are right. Otherwise, declare the saints, we're in trouble.

In his classic work *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, John of the Cross discusses how we become slaves to things we love. While true love creates equality between persons as they seek to serve each other, disordered love creates slavery to sin. It rules our lives and subjects us to its power. Attachment to this world leads to worldliness, "for love effects a likeness between the lover and the loved." The goal is to become "otherworldly," like Christ, not his creatures.