

SURRENDERING TO JESUS CHRIST

By Jim Seghers

“Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus, who 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. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:5-11).

The Catholic faith is not a religion of a book, even a divinely inspired book. Rather it is a profoundly altering relationship with Jesus Christ:

“and he [the Father] has put all things under his [Christ] feet and has made him the head over all things for the church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:22).

God’s Love

Authentic Christians can say with St. Paul:

“I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). The astounding reality that the Divine Word assumed human nature to suffer and die for us is beyond our understanding. Indeed, it even exceeds the reach of our imagination. How can we wrap our limited minds around a mystery of this magnitude? The distance between God’s nature and ours also escapes our grasp. How can we adequately compare any creature with the infinite power of God who created the universe and everything in it by an effortless act of his will. How can we comprehend an intelligence so vast that grasping the complexity of creation is easier for God than our understanding of the sum of one plus one? Even the comparison of a drop of water to the Pacific Ocean limps in its attempt to compare us to vastness of God’s infinite greatness.

If we are staggered by the immensity of God’s power and knowledge, what can we say about his love? The very nature of love is the self-sacrificing gift of oneself to another. Yet, we who love so poorly are the recipients of God’s infinite love. He offers us everything - himself. No wonder St. John exclaimed in awe: “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8, 16). The theme of God’s love runs through the entire Bible.

Old Testament

“I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you” (Jer 31:3).

“And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord” (Hos 2:19-20).

New Testament

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).

“See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (1 Jn 3:1).

“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins” (1 Jn 4:9-10).

Becoming a Disciple

“Come follow me,” is the call that Jesus gives to every man. In the Book of Revelation he is depicted as standing before the door of our heart gently knocking to come in. If we open our heart to him, he will dine with us in the wedding banquet of the Lamb (Rev 3:20; 21:1-4).

The essence of following Jesus, becoming a true disciple, is *abiding* with Jesus in every sense of the word:

“*Abide* in me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it *abides* in the vine, neither can you unless you *abide* in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who *abides* in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not *abide* in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. If you *abide* in me, and my words *abide* in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; *abide* in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will *abide* in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and *abide* in his love” (Jn 15:4-10).

According to Leiva-Merikakis, “The condition for abiding at the side of the Master of Life is that one be willing to shatter all illusions about the self’s importance, wisdom, and general accomplishments and put on joyfully the truer identity of a ‘dumb beast’. It was an ass after all, that was privileged to bear the Lord Jesus on his back in his triumphal entry into Jerusalem!”¹

Jesus affirmed that he is “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6). We are called to follow our “good shepherd” (Jn 10:11) like sheep. Sheep are dumb and dependent. They don’t adapt and improvise on their own. They just follow. Goats, on the other hand, display intelligence and independence. Therefore, they easily become unruly. Jesus used the metaphor of sheep and goats when describing the Last Judgment:

“When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will

¹ Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, *The Way of the Disciple*, p. 16.

separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.' And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Mt 25:31-46).

The goats chose to do things "their" way. They traveled down the wide, well worn road cleared by Satan and his demons. The sheep traveled the narrow road that Christ laid out for them.

In his marvelous encyclical on the virtue of hope, *spe salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI gives the following instruction:

"Our relationship with God is established through communion with Jesus--we cannot achieve it alone or from our own resources alone. The relationship with Jesus, however, is a relationship with the one who gave himself as a ransom for all (cf. 1 Tim 2:6). Being in communion with Christ draws us into his 'being for all'; it makes it our own way of being. He commits us to live for others, but only through communion with him does it become possible truly to be there for others, for the whole."²

We love God by our obedient surrender, but we love others by patience, kindness, gentleness, sensitivity, forgiveness, and caring for their needs. Therefore, St. John wrote:

"He who says 'I know him' but disobeys his commandments is a liar and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love for God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him: he who says he *abides* in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked" (1 Jn 1:4-6).

"If any one says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And

² # 28

this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also” (1 Jn 4:20-21).

Becoming a disciple means surrendering to a radical, earth-shattering, new existence in Christ that must be embraced day after day. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation,” wrote St. Paul (2 Cor 5:17). This is what it means to be a Catholic. It is only by faithfully living this new life that we can become the persons God created us to be, instead of the illusory, even deformed, selves we manufacture.

Spiritual Children

“At that time Jesus declared: ‘I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will. All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light’” (Mt 11:25-30).

God’s holiness shatters pride in all its forms; while the modern mantra, in contrast, calls us to become masters of our world. St. Paul counters this delusion with the paradox of Christ’s life and its impact on us:

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9).

Writings to the Galatians, St. Paul added:

“For if any one thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself” (Gal 6:3).

But how can we become rich in Christ, if we have become, or are striving to become, rich by relying on our own efforts. Diligence and hard work can be a good thing, but we are incapable of that vital reshaping, which can only come from the Master’s hands.

Thus God spoke to the prophet Jeremiah:

“Like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel” (Jer 18:6).

Discipleship is a lived school in which we continually learn to become like Christ through our intimate association with him. In this encounter we are faced with deliberate choices, repeated on an hourly basis. It’s the choice of which master to serve: self, the world, the devil, or our Savior Jesus Christ? The disciple chooses to follow Christ. Then he employs his God given freedom by making himself the obedient servant of the all-wise God. He has chosen to obey his heavenly mother who said: “Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2:5).

Jesus operates in us through the Holy Spirit when we remain poor, little, free and available to God's transforming love. The psalmist's urgent message reminds us to live in the present moment with a malleable and docile heart: "O that today you would hearken to his voice! Harden not your hearts" (Ps 95:7-8).

Before Jesus can send us to heal the world in whatever state of life we find ourselves, we must first be healed ourselves. This needed transformation occurs in the daily intimate companionship with Jesus that is achieved in sharing our innermost thoughts and aspirations in prayer, reflection on the Word of God, and being filled with Jesus in Holy Communion.

"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break is it not a participation in the body of Christ" (1 Cor 10:16).

In the safety of Christ's loving embrace, we can acknowledge our ineptitude and helplessness as we cry out: "Be merciful to me a sinner." When we do well, we also need to reflect on Jesus' words:

"So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty'" (Lk 17:10).

Yes, and even that faithfulness would be impossible except for God's grace. In this admission we accept our littleness and remain in Christ.

As we have seen, Jesus identified the spiritual "babes," the *nepioi* or "infants" (Mt 11:25), as those who capture his heart and the heart of his Father. Babies have no wisdom. They can boast of no accomplishments. They are helpless and innocent. However, to God's flaming love they are irresistible. St. Matthew recorded Jesus' poignant lesson on spiritual childhood:

"At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them, and said, 'Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'" (Mt 18:1-5).

In another marvelous use of paradox, Jesus reversed the definition of "great" and "small" upsetting the disciple's comfortable understanding of these words that was spawned by ego and the values of this world. Jesus rejected self-reliance and self-acclaim, but exalted as "great" the utter dependency and helplessness of children, the "little ones".

To fully understand Jesus' lesson on spiritual childhood, we should recognize that in the world of the first century children were of little importance. They had neither rights nor social standing. In the Greek language the same word, *pais*, can be translated as "child" or "servant," even "slave". The boy in this brief narrative was standing in the back as a non-entity, so as not to distract from the important activity of adults. They were standing with their backs to him, which was indicative of the general disdain of children. Jesus judges things very differently.

Jesus called the boy with words that remarkably paralleled the exact words Jesus used to call the Apostles. This choice of words was a reminder to the disciples that they, too, are unimportant men upon whom the great ones of the world and even their own religious leaders had turned their backs. It was also a reminder that they were chosen because of Jesus' love and mercy, not because of their wonderful accomplishments.

The boy heard Jesus' call. He immediately came to Jesus and allowed himself to be placed "in the midst of them" (Mt 18:2). The text gives no indication of hesitancy, resistance, self-consciousness or embarrassment. Jesus called. That's all that mattered. Then Jesus made a statement that surely startled his disciples when he solemnly declared: "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 18:3). In other words, "unless you change your present way of acting and respond to my call like this boy, you won't even enter heaven. So forget about who's the greatest."

The way of spiritual childhood is the way of surrender, that is, giving up the fantasy of control. Submission is the straight road to the heaven, but by way of the cross. The disciples were concerned about rank in kingdom of heaven instead of focusing on servicing its members. All projects of self-promotion in Jesus' kingdom are valueless and must be abandoned. All the trappings of worldly success are stripped away at death. Why not surrender them now?

In this little anecdote the disciples were instructed to abandon any attitude of self-importance so they can become spiritual shepherds. It is difficult to jettison the encumbering habits of adults that chain us to worldly standards and selfishness. Nevertheless, Jesus said we must "*become* like children" (Mt 18:3). The Greek word *gignomai* can be rendered "to become" or "to be born". These two ideas converge in this passage to convey the depth of the transformation necessary when Jesus said: "Unless you become like children." Jesus came to give us a new life (Rom 6:4; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15 Eph 4:22-24), "and to have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10).

Jesus did, in fact, answer the disciples' initial self-serving question with the words: "Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 18:4). Humility is based on truth. Humility acknowledges the reality of our littleness and helplessness before God. The spiritual child is humble and, therefore, claims no special rights for himself. He makes no personal demands from others. He depends solely on God. When the Apostles embraced this spirit, Jesus worked miracles through them as is evidenced in Acts of the Apostles. It is this attitude, and this attitude alone, that allows God to continually work miracles through his disciples.

The great Spanish mystic and director of souls, St. John of the Cross wrote: "God falls in love with the soul not because his eyes are attracted to her greatness, but to the greatness of her humility. Consider our Blessed Mother. Did she boast, "Look at me, I'm sinless," or "I'm the mother of God." No! She recognized that her freedom from all sin was due to God's preventative salvation and the conception of Jesus was due to

God's mercy. Her whole orientation is directed toward God first, and others second, but never on herself.

"My spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked upon the lowliness of his slave girl. He who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is His name" (Lk 1:47-48).

Growth in the spiritual life takes time, not because grace is weak, but because we cling to attachments and attitudes that pull us away from God's influence. God never forces. St. Matthew's Gospel provides a marvelous example of Jesus' patience in repeating the same lesson to the apostles over and over again. The lesson of humility figured prominently in the Sermon on the Mount. In the beatitudes he revealed the heart of his Father and exposed his own heart. He declared that "the poor in spirit," "the meek," "those who hunger and thirst for justice," "the merciful," "the pure of heart," "the peacemakers," and "those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake," are blessed (Mt 5:3-12). He taught his disciples that almsgiving (Mt 6:1-4), prayer (Mt 6:5-6) and fasting (Mt 6:16-18) was not about calling attention to oneself.

He told his followers: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal" (Mt 6:19). Then he gave them a life altering principle: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Mt 6:21). Jesus tutored his disciples to be urgent and persistent in prayer. Prayer by its very nature is an acknowledgment of our helplessness and a cry to God for help (Mt 7:7-11).

Jesus thanked his Father because he revealed the secrets of his heart and true wisdom to "children" and not to the so-called "wise" of this world (Mt 11:25). Then Jesus declared: "Learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart" (Mt 11:29).

In chapter 14 of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gave a lesson on humility to Simon, whom he will rename *kepha*, "Rock". Peter walked on water as long as he focused on Jesus, but once he focused on Simon he sank like a rock (Mt 14:22-23). Subsequently, after Jesus had renamed Simon and promised to make him his prime-minister (Mt 16:13-29), Jesus immediately give Peter another lesson on humility. When Peter presumed to lead the Lord rather than follow him, Jesus told him: "Get behind me, Satan" (Mt 16:23)! Jesus understands that pride is a multi-headed serpent with numerous deceptive tentacles. It is the root cause of the evils that will corrupt Christians down through the centuries.

In his letter to Dioscorus St. Augustine gave a powerful instruction on the importance of humility. "I wish you to prepare for yourself no other way of seizing and holding the truth than that which has been prepared by Him who, as God, saw the weaknesses of our doings. In that way the first part is *humility*; the second, *humility*; the third, *humility*; and this I continue to repeat as often as you might ask direction, not that there are no other instructions which may be given, but because, unless humility *proceed, accompany and follow every good action* which we perform being at once the object which we keep before our eyes, the support to which we cling, and the monitor by which we are

restrained, pride wrests wholly from our hand any good work on which we are congratulating ourselves.”

God loves spiritual children because they are empty of themselves and their accomplishments; so he can give them what he wants to give them, which is exactly what they need - the heart of the loving, obedient and faithful Son. However, when we are too full of our own ideas, projects and anxieties we are not empty enough to receive anything. The irony is we experience great freedom and relief when we abandon all attempts to be the master of our own lives and begin to live by faith in what only God can do for us and in us.

We live in an age where success, individualism, power, fame, and independence are praised as the great virtues. It's a futile attempt to live by standards of our own creation. However, it is easily observable that the “successful” people of this world are slaves to tyrants of their own making. They “labor and are heavy laden” (Mt 11:28). These slaves are often respectful, outwardly successful, and well educated. However, they live under a crushing burden of striving and anxiety. Weary with exhaustion and frustration, they grapple with self-doubts about their misdirected life and wonder why life is so sour. Like the psalmist, their deepest being inwardly cries out under this unbearable weight:

“For my soul is full of troubles and my life draws near to Sheol [the abode of the dead]. I am reckoned among those who go down to the Pit; I am a man who has no strength” (Ps 87:3-4).

Jesus offers another way, a better way, the freedom and peace of resting securely in the Father's arms just like the Son. Let's recall Jesus' gentle call:

“Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Mt 11:28-30).

This “rest” demands the effort of continual surrender of all that is our own devising so God can have full room for acting. It's a “rest” that brings: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:23). What a wonderful tradeoff from the lash of anxiety and stress under which so many of us toil! Jesus is the Master who is “gentle and lowly of heart” (Mt 11:29) in contrast to the tyrannical and capricious master of our own making who crushes us with burdens too heavy to carry. This tyrant comes in many disguises: money, possessions, sex, drugs, pornography, perfectionism, alcohol, and the drive for power and success, comparing ourselves with others, workaholism, and the fantasy of being in control.

But does Jesus truly make our burden light? After all, didn't he demand that we must daily take up our cross to be his disciples (Mt 10:38; 16:24)? What's light about that? Perhaps, too, we remember St. Paul's enumeration of his sufferings:

“Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger

from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardships, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure” (2 Cor 11;24-27).

Then there are the daily anxieties and burdens we all carry. So how does Jesus make our burden light? The Lord Jesus gave Paul the universal answer in the midst of his trials: “My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9a). Jesus makes our burdens light because he helps us carry the load, not that he removes the difficulties in this life. Therefore, St. Paul proclaimed:

“I will all the more gladly boast of weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:9b-10).

St. Paul understood that in surrendering to Jesus’ gentle heart he shared in his mission and destiny, and he also entered into intimacy with the Father. Then he was freed from the awful burden of self-will, that unrelenting tyrant who sucks out the vitality of the soul making life bitter and eternity a hell. He lived instead in the Love who only wants to give everything. This is discipleship.

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