



# From Martha to Mary

## The Direction of Prayer

### Orientation

**T**HE PREVIOUS CHAPTER presented the evolution of prayer in four stages. But my prayer life can also be spoken of as a lifelong process of conversion within me. God saves me through this evolving relationship. But what does God save me from? How will my life change as I grow in my contemplative relationship? And by the end of it, how will I be different from what I am now? This chapter discusses the transformation that will take place within me during the course of my prayer life.

### The Human Condition

The following is a recent entry from my prayer-journal:

Dear Lord,

Last week, on Holy Thursday, I was to lead a communion service in the high-security unit of the Suffolk County Jail. After a great deal of preparation, I walked into the big recreation room of the unit and shouted out my weekly invitation, "Prayer services in the multipurpose room." I then walked into the little side room, laid out my stuff and

waited. But no one came. After a while, I packed up my stuff and walked out. To leave the unit, I had to walk back through the recreation room where no one had moved from their places in front of the television set. It was painful for me to see that these prisoners were choosing to watch television over coming to my prayer service.

A second painful moment of rejection was just yesterday afternoon. I was to give a presentation on prayer to a group of college students, but only one person showed up and the whole thing was canceled. That was a real humiliation, too.

Sadly, these two rejection moments were a stark reminder to me of who is at the center of my universe, and it's not you, Lord. If it were you, I would not have left that prison licking my own wounds. I may have been disappointed, but I would have been disappointed that the guys chose TV over you, Lord, not over me. Or maybe I wouldn't have been disappointed at all. Perhaps, I would simply have trusted that you were working in their lives in a variety of other ways.

Likewise, if you were really my Lord, I would have talked with the one college student who did show up for that presentation instead of canceling it and walking out of there with my wounded pride. I would have rejoiced in this young woman's wonderful desire to grow closer to you, and I would have done everything in my power to help her to do so. But, unfortunately, I could not see past my own selfish wishes and disappointments.

As I write this journal entry, I sadly wonder if I will ever truly have you as the center of my life. If it does ever happen, it will be because you have made it so, not I. So I realize that even now, after all these years, my prayer is to ask for conversion—my own conversion.

Theologians often use the term “the human condition” to refer to the sinful state of humans from which only God can save. What is it about me that needs redemption? From what am I being saved? How do I become saved? These are all fundamental questions of faith. One could fill a library

with the reflections these questions have generated throughout history. Here, I lay out my own reflections and will explore the connection between the human condition and contemplative prayer.

The human condition is such that I spend my life struggling to be my own master and lord. I cling to the illusion that I am the god of my own life, and I go to any lengths to keep that illusion alive. Deep down inside, I know that my own kingship is inadequate, but I cannot accept that. I spend my life trying to prove to others and to myself that I am worthy to be lord. I am obsessed with doing, proving, having, showing, moving, winning, owning and on and on. These actions are my desperate attempts to prove to myself that I am the creator (my products) and the ruler (my control), and am adore-able (my achievements). Because it is a lie, because I am not any of those things, the proof will never be enough. I must constantly engage in more action, make more products, achieve more goals. If I could watch myself from a divine perspective, I'm sure that I would look as silly as a dog chasing his tail.

So what do I do to stop this craziness? How do I put God at the center of my life? Even these simple questions reveal the depth and potency of the human condition, because the questions, themselves, are flawed. They assume that there is something *I* can do to fix the problem. They expose the fact that *I* am still my own savior. I recognize that there is a problem, but I still insist that *I* be the “prime mover,” the one doing the fixing.

The truth is that, because of the human condition, I do not have the ability to place God at the center of my life. God will have to place himself there. My job is to stay out of the way and let God do his thing. I need to stop doing and allow God to do the doing to me, in me, for me. My part is so simple, and yet, because I am so stuck in the rut of the human condition, it will take my whole lifetime—maybe more—to completely surrender to God. God will indeed

make himself my God, but he will not do so against my free will. He will not push me off the throne. He will patiently, lovingly, slowly take over my life as I awkwardly, painfully, begrudgingly allow him to do so. First, I may allow him to sit on a corner of the throne. After a long while, I will inch over and allow him to sit beside me. Only in the end will I finally sit in my Father's lap and rest there from the childish games of my life.

Even when I become a "good Christian," when I am baptized, pray regularly, and am active in my church, the conversion process is *not* over. The human condition may not have as tight a grip on me, but it is not completely gone. There will still be a very strong part of me that is scrambling for the top. My tactics will change and become much more subtle and sophisticated. Instead of blatantly striving for power, position, wealth, I will now conceal this part of me. I will dress it up in an angelic robe. Now, instead of being the best, I will be the holiest. Instead of being the greatest businessman, I will strive to be the greatest minister. Instead of having the most beautiful body, I will build in me the most beautiful soul. Instead of making the most money, I will spend the most on charity. Instead of doing the most for the boss, I will do the most for the Church, the community, the poor, the world. Nothing has changed. I am still the center of my life. It is still all about me: about my (Christian) efforts, my (altruistic) achievements, my (spiritual) beauty. My doggy tail is now purest white, but it is still my doggy tail.

Many Christians never understand or accept this reality. The human condition is too firmly entrenched in their souls. They take too much pride in their Christian actions. Once, at a youth Mass, I noticed someone wearing a T-shirt that said, "I'm not a saint yet, but I'm working on it." What a contradiction in terms! The saints don't work at being saints. *The saints are those who give up!* They are the ones who admit and accept their failure to be holy, and allow God to do holy things within them. They do not "achieve" sainthood; they

receive it as a free gift from God. Like Archbishop Romero, they say to God, “I can’t. You must.” Like Saint Paul, they joyfully proclaim, “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

## From Martha to Mary

The Gospel of Luke best reflects this dichotomy between the distorted model of sainthood and the true saint:

*Now as they went on their way, [Jesus] entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:38-42)*

Many people claim that this passage is about having a balance in one’s life between working for the Lord and resting in the Lord. But that’s not really what the passage says, is it? Jesus is quite clear here: “[T]here is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part.”

Martha wants to be a disciple, but is obsessed with doing things for Jesus instead of letting Jesus do great things in and through her. Mary represents the person who has surrendered her life to Jesus. She sits at Jesus’ feet with nothing to show for herself—no great accomplishments or achievements. She doesn’t even have any prepared appetizers to serve him. All she has is her receptive spirit.

Jesus knows well this type of person because his mother, Mary, had the same outlook. She is honored and is the model for all Christians not because of what she did, but because of what she allowed God to do through her. She did

not say, "I will do it," but rather, "May it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38, *The New American Bible*).

The problem with the Martha-state is not with actions themselves, of course. Most of the saints lead extremely active lives. The difference lies in what is at the center of one's life. The human condition tempts me to put my actions at the center of my life. In the Martha-state, I work for God, but it is still *my* work that is at the center of my life. Everything is different for the saint. For her, actions are the offspring of God's lordship in her life. They are God's actions being done through her.

The project of my life, then, is to allow God to move me from the Martha-state to the Mary-state—from a life centered on good actions, to a life centered on surrendering to the True King, who does good things within and through me. How do I do that? How do I make surrendering to God my life project? This is where contemplative prayer enters in. When I pray, my goal is to come as close as I can to what Mary did on that day Jesus dropped by for a visit. I sit in stillness with nothing. I sit in God's presence, not proudly presenting products, achievements and accomplishments—Christian or otherwise—but with empty hands. Ultimately, I don't even offer words to God. I am an empty vessel ready to be filled. This is the direction in which I want to go in my contemplative prayer life. It is "the one thing" for which there is need (see Luke 10:42).

What of activities in my prayer, then? Am I to stop praying the rosary, or telling God what's on my mind, or listening to God tell me what's on his mind? No, those activities are still immensely valuable. But in contemplative prayer, they are not ends in themselves. I use those activities to help me get to that quiet Mary-state-of-being and let them go once they get me there.

## The First Thing to Surrender

As a beginner, this surrendering begins on day one of my prayer life with the most basic trivialities of prayer: The Lord asks me to surrender my preoccupation with doing prayer perfectly.

Consider these modern-day Marthas and Marys:

*Martha:* "A few years ago, I was invited to the home of my newly wedded friends. I was told that we would 'hang out' and 'do nothing,' but upon arriving, I found that they took this task of hanging out quite seriously. For instance, everyone knows that the perfect hanging-out activity would be to eat hamburgers in front of the TV. So, three previously unused, natural wood TV trays (given to them as a wedding gift last month) were carefully laid out in the living room, two at the love seat for them and one at the recliner for me. Hamburger patties awaited me at the snack bar accompanied by every possible condiment known to man. Diet drinks were served in jelly-jar glasses (from Crate & Barrel) and there was even an appropriately mindless video ready in the VCR. There was something about this project of doing nothing that ultimately made me nervous."

*Mary:* "As a Jesuit novice, I lived in Grand Coteau, Louisiana, a sleepy little Cajun town of about six hundred people. On my evening walks, I loved waving to old Mr. and Mrs. Savoy sitting on their porch and contentedly staring out onto the street at nothing in particular. Since this old couple sat on their porch every evening, one would think that they would have good-looking and comfy chairs to sit in, but that was not the case. Mrs. Savoy's rocker was off-balance and caused the old woman to have a certain skewed look about her, like a picture on a wall that is just crooked enough to make one want to do something about it. The seat of Mr. Savoy's rattan chair had broken long ago and he would have fallen right through if he hadn't stuffed a pillow in the hole. Even with this pillow, he did sink a bit, trapping him so that by the time night fell and the mosquitoes got bad, he could not get up without Mrs. Savoy's

assistance. The sagging porch, the slanted old woman and the trapped old man looked nothing like the glamorous picture of my Martha-like newly-wedded friends that sits on my bookshelf at home. And yet, none of these things mattered to the Savoys. The conditions in which they sat never crossed their minds. They just...sat."

As a beginning pray-er I, myself, approached the task of prayer in the same Martha-state that the young newlyweds approached the task of hanging out. I quickly became trapped into a game of Let's Pray! and tried to accomplish the perfect prayer. It was very important for me to do everything correctly in my prayer. I practiced placing my head in the same tilt that the Virgin Mary had in all of those 1950's pictures on the wall of my grandmother's house. I spent a lot of time trying to get into the perfect lotus position, or sitting on one of those little Zen benches. I memorized Latin chants. I read all the right books on prayer, learning the meaning of terms like "kataphatic prayer."

The problem was that I read those books and practiced those positions and techniques in the hope of progressing in prayer. I wanted to know the rules of the road, the policies and procedures, so that I might successfully do prayer. I was approaching prayer in that same frenetic Martha-state that I approached everything in life. Prayer was to be another achievement to be checked off my to-do list—another accomplishment with which I could say (at least to myself), "Look at what I've done. See what a good Christian I'm becoming." I did not realize that prayer must "be done to me" by God.

I, as a beginner, must learn to sit with the Savoys. I must learn from books like this one, not how to sit, but rather how to stop worrying about how to sit. I must not fret about which stage I am in or whether I'm good at praying. All of the little "tips" I find in this book and elsewhere will be of no use to me unless I approach prayer in the spirit of Mary and of the Savoys. Books like these should get me started, not

help me finish the job of praying. This is the first moment of surrender. Many more will follow.

## Conclusion

Have I picked up this book because my prayer seems as sloppy and disheveled as the porch-sitting Savoy? Will I read this book to learn how to “clean it up” and “do it right”? Or will I surrender those preoccupations and let the Lord decide what my prayer should be like? And will I allow this book to teach me to embrace the relationship I already have with God, messy as it might be?

In the previous chapter, I said that the path of contemplative prayer is a path that leads me from Talking at God, through Talking to God, through Listening to God and finally to Being With God. This four-stage process can be simplified by saying that in contemplative prayer, I move from a Martha-state-of-doing to a Mary-state-of-being. Ultimately, both descriptions come down to an evolution of surrendering to God. This is the direction in which I am going in my journey through prayer. It is the “one thing” necessary.