

Chapter One

LORD AND DIVINE MASTER

“Lord... O Divine Master...”

Linda had taught junior English in the same Catholic high school for ten years. She was an exceptional teacher and a committed Catholic whose lifestyle often challenged the religious sisters who ran the school.

One day she saw a television news report about the suffering of people in Africa. “I heard a voice in my heart saying, ‘Go! I have work for you to do there!’ It was the most difficult decision in my life. I loved teaching at Sacred Heart. I appreciated the respect of my colleagues and I adored the kids. But years ago, I made the conscious decision to dedicate my life to God. I knew it was a gamble but after talking to my spiritual director and some friends, I felt I had to respond. After all, I had never heard a call in my life as powerful and clear as I did that night in front of the television. I went to Africa not because I wanted to, but because I was called. To be honest, I cried for weeks as I applied to volunteer organizations and handed in my resignation. In hindsight, I am glad I did. It was the happiest time in my life.”

I sat rapt in reverent silence as I listened. I couldn’t help but think that this woman knows God and more importantly, had surrendered herself as a servant just like the Lord and Divine Master.

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THE EGO

The ego is our sense of self-importance, how we feel about our bodies, our accomplishments and ourselves. Additionally, our occupations help to construct the ego. A healthy ego is well aware of its physical image, personal success and effect upon others. A mature person respects such things and does not flaunt them or abuse them. That person is also very much aware that authentic self-worth is based upon the ability to look beyond one's projected image and the willingness to contribute to something bigger than "me." Such selflessness and charity actually nourish a mature person's self-worth.

However, for many of us, the ego is a perpetual two-year-old that screams to be spoon-fed with power, prestige and possessions. And fools that we are, we actually waste too much time chained to the ego's high chair, trying to entertain and satisfy this spoiled child. We cave in to its temper tantrums and selfishly demand position and recognition. We jockey for center stage and the place of honor. By spending so much time and attention on feeding the ego, we become self-absorbed megalomaniacs always primping in front of a mirror and asking the same question over and over again: "What's in it for me?"

In his mid-forties, Eric is a person who is well aware that his shirt needs more starch but is clueless about his teenager's drug problem and oblivious to his wife's depression. A grinder of teeth at night, he has white-knuckled and steamrolled his way through life, which is summarized in his customized automobile plates—"E-R-I-C." He has never noticed people rolling their eyes as he begins gesticulating about his latest achievement in the accounting firm. Tragically, Eric is totally unaware

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that there is another life outside his own skin.

People like Linda, on the other hand, exist in a completely different universe. They look beyond the horizon of the self and the orbit of the ego. They have discovered that freedom, happiness and fulfillment are found in a life centered on “thee,” not “me,” and that “thee” is the Lord and Divine Master of the Peace Prayer and those whom the Master sends into their lives.

LITTLE CHRISTS

The two major sections of the Peace Prayer begin by acknowledging a Lord and Divine Master other than me. This direct affront to the ego causes a psychological and spiritual earthquake. Self-serving priorities and self-centered allegiances are knocked off the shelves as a new center of gravity is established. The ground we walk upon shifts—and Linda’s experience shows, sometimes literally—as we recognize that our lives are not pieces of personal property upon which we are free to build gaudy monuments to ourselves. In a nutshell, as Paul asks us, “Do you not know...that you are not your own?” (1 Corinthians 6:19).

Indeed, we belong to Jesus Christ the moment we rise from the waters of baptism bearing his name. Christian means “little Christ.” As such, our vocation is to model our lives on the Lord’s. Paul states the ramifications of this for the ego. In the ancient baptismal hymn cited in Philippians (2:6–11), the apostle reminds us that Jesus refused to be sucked into the black hole of “me” and exploit his equality with God. Rather, Jesus “emptied himself”—a graphic expression suggesting the

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complete reversal of human nature's tendency and the ego's natural inclination. The hymn uses a striking image and says Jesus voluntarily became a slave. In other words, he freely chose to put his life at the service of his Father and others. In surrendering his will to the Father's plan, Jesus becomes the Lord of the universe, worthy of the adoration of all. The apostle challenges us, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (2:5).

FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTPRINTS

Francis of Assisi referred to this attitude as "following in the footprints" of the Divine Master, an image he borrowed from the First Letter of Peter: "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps" (2:21). To follow in these footprints is to embark upon a journey of words and deeds that chips away at the domination of egotistical pride. Indeed, the footprints of the Master are molded by actions which erase the outline of the ego—forgiveness of the enemy, prayers for those who persecute us, turning the other cheek, compassion for those who suffer and unconditional love. It is a self-emptying lifestyle focused upon "thee," not "me."

Like walking in someone else's footprints left behind in the snow, following in the footprints of the Master does not come naturally. It demands razor-sharp attention and commitment. We may be awkward and clumsy at first, but we know to walk in the Master's footprints requires two conscious decisions which need to be renewed daily.

First, like the Divine Master, we need to mature and break

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free from the ego's control, from being preoccupied and consumed with ourselves and our puny worlds. This maturity comes through prayer and reflection, discipline and asceticism.

Praying and reflecting upon the Peace Prayer shine a light into the deep recesses of the soul. The prayer reveals how our pride sometimes hides behind the best of intentions and has wrapped its tentacles around our decisions, feelings and relationships. It challenges us to break free from the mirror of "me" and focus our attention through the window of "thee," thus looking outward and responding to the voices of those who are angry, injured, confused and sad. The prayer also exposes how we defensively seek to be justified and understood, how self-pity insists upon consolation and love.

Over time, as we pray this prayer and consciously walk the journey of selflessness, we break free of the gravitational pull of "me" and are raised to a higher orbit. We begin to ignore the self-serving tantrums of the ego. We begin to see how our reactions to some people are based upon the desire for revenge; how we, like Eric, are so wrapped up in ourselves that we fail to see those hurting around us; how we are sometimes drenched in pride or self-pity.

Realization and refusal of the "me" syndrome are enforced and strengthened through asceticism and discipline. Simple acts of self-denial—from refusing to offer self-righteous words of justification to not buying an ice cream cone and contributing the saved money to the poor—ever so gradually cut the ego off from its life support. We begin to starve it. And as we do, the ego loses its strength and grip on our lives. We become

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mature as the determination of John the Baptist becomes our own: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

SELF-SURRENDER

Self-denial is not enough, however. It can become a sickness or disorder if it does not have a larger objective, if it has no greater purpose than the taming of the ego. Following in the footprints of the Lord requires a second conscious decision: like the Master who emptied himself and then paradoxically chose to become a servant, I die to myself and then hand my life over in love and obedience to the will of God.

As a “little Christ,” my self-renunciation becomes a gift poured into the hands of God. The self-denial of a disciple must blossom into the self-surrender of a servant. I empty myself of “me” to be filled with a new source of purpose and passion—a “thee”-centered life rooted in God’s will. As we shall see in the following chapters, the Peace Prayer shows us practical ways of moving beyond “me” and being rooted in “thee”; it also shows us the practical ways God’s will is manifested in our lives. Indeed, this prayer is a servant’s plea and a pilgrim’s roadmap to becoming an instrument, a servant of God’s will.

We begin to pray the two major sections of the Peace Prayer—“Lord...Divine Master”—and the ground beneath our feet immediately begins to move. We realize and acknowledge that the universe was not designed to revolve around me and my petty wants and desires. Indeed, by virtue of my baptism, I am called to walk in the footprints of Jesus who, in

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emptying himself, surrendering and serving God's will, has become the Lord and Divine Master of the universe.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What positive qualities do I have? How am I using them to follow in the footprints of the Lord?
2. How am I still feeding my ego? How would serving others nourish me?
3. What acts of self-denial can help me move beyond "me" to "thee"? What new purpose and passion would these acts bring into my life?
4. In what practical ways can I live out my vocation as a "little Christ"? How is Jesus Lord and Divine Master of my life?