

## CHAPTER 6

# FORMATION PRAYER



*Prayer—secret, fervent, believing prayer—lies at the root of all personal godliness. —William Cary*

“Prayer changes things,” people say. It also changes us. The latter goal is the more imperative. The primary purpose of prayer is to bring us into such a life of communion with the Father that, by the power of the Spirit, we are increasingly conformed to the image of the Son. This process of transformation is the sole focus of Formation Prayer.

None of us will keep up a life of prayer unless we are prepared to change. We will either give it up or turn it into a little system that maintains the form of godliness but denies the power of it—which is the same thing as giving it up.

When we begin to walk with God, he is gracious and marvelously answers our feeble, egocentric prayers. We think, “This is wonderful. God is real after all!” In time, however, when we try to push this button again, God says to us, “I would like to be more than your Provider. I also want to be your Teacher and your Friend. Let me lead you into a more excellent way. I want to free you of the greed and avarice, the fear and hostility that make your life one great sorrow.” Now, we may chaff under this and struggle against it, but in time we learn the goodness of rightness and begin to move into holy obedience. Each day in a new and living way the brooding Spirit of God teaches us. As we begin to follow these nudgings of the Spirit, we are changed from the inside out.

The old writers had a term for this dynamic of change—*conversatio morum*.<sup>1</sup> It is a hard phrase to translate. Negatively, it means

death to the status quo, death to things as they have always been. Positively, it means constant change, constant conversion, constant openness to the movings of the Spirit. Jean-Pierre de Caussade writes, "The soul, light as a feather, fluid as water, innocent as a child, responds to every movement of grace like a floating balloon."<sup>2</sup>

In earlier chapters I have made passing reference to the way prayer changes the ingrained habit structures of our lives. In Formation Prayer this issue becomes the center of our concern. Crucial questions must be addressed. How does prayer of this sort enable us to throttle egoism and shed the burden of self-importance? In what way does it stimulate spiritual growth? What role does it play in producing in us the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22)?

#### THE LIMITATION OF PRAYER

Before proceeding, I must offer a caution. We should not overstate the place of prayer in the formation of "holy habits." Prayer by itself is severely limited in the good it can accomplish. It is only a part—albeit an important part—of a much larger whole.

Dallas Willard speaks of the three major areas God uses in our continuing transformation—a "golden triangle" of formation, if you will. The first area is the classical disciplines of the spiritual life: solitude, fasting, worship, celebration, and the like. The second area is our continual interaction with the movings of the Spirit of God: resistance, disobedience, repentance, submission, faith, obedience, and more. The third major area is the patient endurance God develops in us by means of the various frustrations, trials, and temptations we face daily.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, we must never isolate prayer from the rest of Christian devotion and claim more for it than God intended. No, instead we want to see the dynamic interaction of prayer in concert with an overall spiritual life.

Another caution. When I speak of Formation Prayer, I am talking not about perfectionism but about progress in the spiritual life. Such issues as "sinless perfection" and "entire sanctification" are

much debated among the theologians, and while I believe the issues are important, and I even have opinions on them, I am not trying to solve these matters here.

What I do want to insist on is the importance of progress, of growth, of change, of formation. God desires to mold us more and more into Christ's way: "Those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29). We want to see the part Formation Prayer plays in this ongoing conformity.

### PURSUING AND BEING PURSUED

There are both active and passive sides to Formation Prayer. On the active side we are pursuing God. We are sojourners seeking a city whose builder and maker is God. We are a pilgrim people on a journey of faith. We are working out our own salvation with fear and trembling. We are exercising ourselves unto godliness. We are pressing on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:12; 1 Tim. 4:7; Phil. 3:12-14).

On the passive side we are being pursued by God. We are attentive and responsive. We are warm clay in the hands of the Master Potter (Jer. 18).

Both the active and the passive sides are necessary, and both stand in a dynamic tension with one another—a little like Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine Chapel of God and Adam stretching out to one another.

### STRETCHING OUT TO GOD

Look with me at three classical ways of proactive prayer whose principal aim is our transformation. The first is derived from *The Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola.<sup>4</sup> Although Ignatius designed this approach to prayer primarily as a retreat experience for those who came under his leadership, it is also a school of prayer for all of us. The regimen of *The Exercises* has four basic sections, or weeks. The first focuses upon our sins in the light of God's love. The second centers on the life of Christ, the third on the passion of Christ, and the fourth on the resurrection of Christ.

Each of the four weeks is accompanied by a generous supply of meditation exercises, often taken from the Gospels. Here Ignatius is at his best by insisting upon the use of all the senses in each meditation. If, for example, we are considering Christ on trial for his life, we are to "see" the crowd, "hear" the accusations, "feel" the sting of the whip. The point of all this emphasis upon the senses is to move us from reading about to entering in. We are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching the story.

Since the purpose is to bring about conformity to Christlikeness, there is throughout *The Exercises* an uninterrupted asking for special *charisms*, or graces of the Spirit. In the first week we are habitually seeking the grace of being loved by God and being bathed in his love. Throughout the second week our unbroken request is for the grace of being formed into the image of Christ. When we contemplate the passion of Christ, we are continually asking for the grace to die to the attachments of this world. In the final week, which focuses on the resurrection of Christ, the grace we seek is the power of the Spirit to always choose God and God's way.

Many who read these words would be uncomfortable with various details of the Ignatian retreat, but I want to commend this four-part rhythm to you. We all need a deeper musing upon our perennial knack for disobedience and God's unbounded habit of forgiving. We all need a richer contemplation upon that *life*, which shows us the way so we may follow "in his steps." We all need a fuller meditation upon that *death*, which sets us free. We all need a more profound experience of that *resurrection*, which empowers us to obey Christ in all things.

#### THE TWELVE STEPS OF SAINT BENEDICT

A second classical approach to Formation Prayer is the active pursuit of humility described in *The Rule of St. Benedict*.<sup>5</sup> Using the metaphor of Jacob's ladder, Benedict discusses twelve steps into humility.

Humility has received such bad press in our day that we must correct at least a few of the distortions before we are able to assess if we want to take even one step into it, not to mention twelve. Put

in simple terms, humility means to live as close to the truth as possible: the truth about ourselves, the truth about others, the truth about the world in which we live. It has nothing whatever to do with a Casper Milquetoast kind of personality. It does not mean groveling or finding the worst possible things to say about ourselves.

Humility is, in fact, filled with power to bring forth life. The word itself comes from the Latin *humus*, which means fertile ground. "Humility," writes Anthony Bloom, "is the situation of the earth." In one sense humility is nothing more than staying close to the earth. The earth, Bloom reminds us, is always with us, always taken for granted, always walked on by everyone. It is the place where we dump our garbage. "It's there," continues Bloom, "silent and accepting everything and in a miraculous way making out of all the refuse new richness . . . transforming corruption itself into a power of life and a new possibility of creativeness, open to the sunshine, open to the rain, ready to receive any seed we sow and capable of bringing thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold out of every seed."<sup>6</sup> Such is the power of humility. As Teresa of Avila reminds us, "Humility is the principal aid to prayer."<sup>7</sup>

But how do we get it? Humility is one of those virtues that we never attain by focusing on it. The idea is ludicrous. As a result, however, many have concluded that there is therefore nothing we can do to deal with the arrogant, ego-centered drives that plague us—so we simply wait for God to pour humility on our heads. Vain wait!

Benedict has done a great service by showing us that there is spiritual work we can undertake in this realm. There are activities of mind, body, and spirit that will conquer pride and bring the joy of a meek and humble life. While not all of us would agree with each of his steps, we can all be grateful to Benedict for helping us see that there *are* things we can do that will move us forward in the life of humility.

Several of Benedict's steps focus on our relationship with God: "Have a constant reverence for God before our eyes; reject our own will and desires and, instead, do God's will; confess all of our evil thoughts and all of our evil actions to the Lord." Three of the steps deal with our use of the tongue, underscoring the importance of

this single aspect of our lives. We are to cultivate silence, avoid frivolous talk, and use plain, simple speech. One of the steps of humility is "enduring with patience the injuries and afflictions we face." Another is "to be content in all things."

In each case the point of the teaching is its triviality. Simple, ordinary things are undertaken for the love of God. As we experience the many little deaths of going beyond ourselves, we increasingly enter into the grace of humility.

#### THE LITTLE WAY

This leads directly into a third classical approach to Formation Prayer: the Little Way of Thérèse of Lisieux.<sup>8</sup> This simple woman, known only as "the Little Flower," devised a prayer-filled approach to life that has helped many. This Little Way, as she called it, is deceptively simple. It is, in short, to seek out the menial job, to welcome unjust criticisms, to befriend those who annoy us, to help those who are ungrateful. For her part, Thérèse was convinced that these "trifles" pleased Jesus more than the great deeds of recognized holiness. The beauty of the Little Way is how utterly available it is to everyone. From the child to the adult, from the sophisticated to the simple, from the most powerful to the least influential, all can undertake this ministry of small things. The opportunities to live in this way come to us constantly, while the great fidelities happen only now and again. Almost daily we can give smiling service to nagging co-workers, listen attentively to silly bores, express little kindnesses without making a fuss.

We may think these tiny, trivial activities are hardly worth mentioning. That, of course, is precisely their value. They are unrecognized conquests over selfishness. We will never receive a medal or even a "thank you" for these invisible victories in ordinary life—which is exactly what we want.

An incident from Thérèse's autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*, underscores the hiddenness of the Little Way. One uneducated and rather conceited sister had managed to irritate Thérèse in everything she did. Rather than avoid this person, however, she took the

Little Way straight into the conflict: "I set myself to treat her as if I loved her best of all." Thérèse succeeded so well in her Little Way that following her death this same sister declared, "During her life, I made her really happy." Thérèse, I am sure, would be pleased.<sup>9</sup>

### THE COMMUNION OF SOLITUDE

We must now turn our attention to that aspect of Formation Prayer that focuses upon receiving more than striving, yielding more than initiating. The quintessential image here is of clay in the hands of a potter—soft, pliable, malleable. Look with me, then, at three classical approaches to this more passive side of Formation Prayer.

Solitude is the first and the most foundational of these approaches. "Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life," writes Henri Nouwen.<sup>10</sup> The reason for this is simple to see: by means of solitude God frees us from our bondage to people and our own inner compulsions.

To enter solitude, we must disregard what others think of us. Who will understand this call to aloneness? Even our closest friends will see it as a waste of precious time and rather self-centered. But, oh, the liberty that is released in our hearts when we let go of the opinions of others! The less we are mesmerized by human voices, the more we are able to hear the Divine Voice. The less we are manipulated by the expectations of others, the more we are open to the expectations of God.

In solitude, however, we die not only to others but also to ourselves. To be sure, at first we thought solitude was a way to recharge our batteries in order to enter life's many competitions with new vigor and strength. In time, however, we find that solitude gives us power not to win the rat race but to ignore the rat race altogether. Slowly, we find ourselves letting go of our inner compulsions to acquire more wealth than we need, look more youthful than we are, attain more status than is wise. In the stillness, our false, busy selves are unmasked and seen for the imposters they truly are.

Saint Jerome reminds us that we are "never less alone than when alone."<sup>11</sup> I invite you into this communion of solitude.

## PEERING INTO THE ABYSS

Strange as it may sound to modern ears, the contemplation of one's own death is among the most time-honored approaches to personal transformation. In our day of runaway narcissism it is a practice we would do well to revive. What would happen if you were to die today? If I were to die today? One of the most sobering insights from such a meditation is the realization that life would continue right on without us—and quite well, for that matter. The sun would come up the next day. People would go about their normal duties. Nothing of substance would be changed.

This is a hard reality for us who carry the illusion that the world revolves around our decisions. How could anything of importance happen without us there? How *dare* anything of importance happen without us there! You see, we are a little like the fly on the chariot wheel in *Aesop's Fables*, who looked back and declared, "My, what a dust storm I'm causing!"

A Lutheran pastor friend—the Reverend Bill Vaswig—and I once were discussing Galatians 2:19 and wondering what it means to be crucified with Christ. I mean, what are we actually talking about? Bill said, "Let's pray the passage into each other." I had wanted to keep the discussion at arm's length, but I gulped and said, "All right, how do we do it?" "I don't know exactly," was Bill's response, "but you go first!" So I went over to him, placed my hands on his head, and began to pray. I have no idea what I said beyond the hope that he would experience what it means to be crucified with Christ.

When I finished and sat down, Bill looked at me wide eyed and whispered, "It happened!" "What happened?" I responded blankly. He proceeded to explain that as I began praying, he saw a vivid mental picture of his church with a funeral service going on inside. He could see everything clearly: the coffin with the lid open, the chancel, the high arching beams, but he was seeing it all from inside the coffin. It was his funeral! As the people, filled with sorrow, filed past the coffin, he tried to tell them that everything was okay, that he was fine, and that what was happening was good. They could not hear him; all they could see was a corpse, and yet he was more alive than he had ever been.

His prayer for me had equally powerful results, for we were bathed in the milieu of the Holy Spirit that day. Most important of all, we both entered into a deeper understanding of death to the self.

### THE PRAYER OF DOCILITY

A third form of passive Formation Prayer is what Evelyn Underhill calls "the prayer of docility."<sup>12</sup> It is the experience of being "completely supple, completely transparent, completely abandoned in the hands of God."<sup>13</sup>

Let me try to explain it by analogy. Picture a child with a pencil in hand making indecipherable scribbles on a piece of paper. Now watch his mother place her hand over her child's and guide it on the page, making big beautiful letters. This is the prayer of docility.

Again, watch a sail pick up the wind on first one side of a boat and then the other as the person at the helm tacks with skillful ease. The very pliability of the sail is what makes it able to take advantage of the wind. Put a board in its place, and the boat will go nowhere. It is this frailty, this unguarded accessibility that is at the heart of the prayer of docility.

So, as you read these words, yield yourself into the loving hands of the Master Potter. Do not be afraid. He will not "break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick," as Scripture says (Matt. 12:20). He never steps on the weak, never snuffs out the smallest hope. Allow his hand to rest upon yours and guide you. Become weak, frail, vulnerable. Now listen to the voice of the true Shepherd and learn from him.

### THE BLESSEDNESS OF WINTER

As winter approaches each year, I like to watch our large maple in the backyard begin to lose its covering of summer green and take on a funeral brown. As the leaves drop, one by one all of the irregularities and defects of the tree are exposed. The imperfections are always there, of course, but they have been hidden from my view by an emerald blanket. Now, however, it is denuded and desolate, and I can see its real condition.

Winter preserves and strengthens a tree. Rather than expending its strength on the exterior surface, its sap is forced deeper and deeper into its interior depth. In winter a tougher, more resilient life is firmly established. Winter is necessary for the tree to survive and flourish.

Instantly you see the application. So often we hide our true condition with the surface virtues of pious activity, but, once the leaves of our frantic pace drop away, the transforming power of a wintry spirituality can have effect.

To the outward eye everything looks barren and unsightly. Our many defects, flaws, weaknesses, and imperfections stand out in bold relief. But only the outward virtues have collapsed; the principle of virtue is actually being strengthened. The soul is venturing forth into the interior. Real, solid, enduring virtues begin to develop deep within. Pure love is being birthed.



*Dear Lord Jesus, in my better moments I want nothing more than to be like you. But there are other moments. . . . Help me to see how good conformity to your way really is. In my seeking for you may I be found by you. I love you, Lord. —Amen.*