



SURRENDER AND JOY:

PRAYING FOR OUR CHILDREN

Veronica Williams, of the Solace Community in Kent, is the foundress of 'Mothers Prayers', an international movement of prayer for children, with a spirituality of surrender to God, and the author of The Joy of Surrender unto Him! This way has been described as akin to De Caussade's abandonment to divine providence and Brother Lawrence's practice of the presence of God;¹ it is also a way of living Thérèse's 'confidence' in God – her trust in his mercy. In this article, the author reminds us how much we can do for young people through prayer, and gives helpful and inspiring advice for surrendering our lives to God.

¹ A point made by Fr John Edwards, SJ, in Veronica Williams, *The Joy of Surrender unto Him!*, Sevenoaks: Solace Community, 2006, p. 116.

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One hundred percent

The topic of surrender is very dear to my heart. For a number of years now, at conferences for example, I have loved to talk about ‘surrender’. But let me explain that when I speak of surrender I am speaking of one hundred percent surrender! On the whole, people seem to have no problem at all with the idea of seventy-five per cent or even ninety-five. But one hundred percent? Perhaps there is the fear that this will mean losing the control we wish to have over our lives. However, I think of ‘surrender’ in terms of ‘allowing’: for me, it is all about allowing God to be the God of our lives, to make us into the person he created us to be, and to change any area of our life that needs to be changed so that we may live in peace and joy. He is such a tender, loving Lord. He waits patiently for us to invite him more and more into our lives.

The beginnings of my own surrender to God came with a shock: I read a book in which the readers were invited to write their own epitaph, to say how they thought others would remember them after they had died. To my horror, I realised they would probably say I was a good businesswoman! Then I read on, and came to where the readers were asked to say *how* they would like to be remembered. This was quite a different matter. I wrote that I wanted to be remembered as a good mother and grandmother, and that I wanted my life to have meant something especially with regard to children. This would be fulfilled in a striking way with the founding of ‘Mothers Prayers’, though that would come later.

Handing over to God

During this period of my life, I found myself confused, thinking: ‘I don’t know who I am any more.’ I felt I was wearing too many masks: trying to be *this* for one person and *that* for another. I thought of how when I was born I was *me* – the way the Lord created me. And it came to me that I was not living my true potential. And in a flash of recognition, I realised that if I wanted to reach my full potential, then I must be the person the Lord created me to be. I cried out to him to make me that person and I added: ‘I do not care what it takes, I do not care if I am rich or poor, married or single, sick or healthy.’ I really meant every word, even about the sickness.

Sometimes people worry when I talk to them about surrendering to God. They assume they will be asked to give up everything and do impossible things. In fact, it is more likely that he will wish us to remain just where we are now; and by the way we live, to be a sign of his love and protection to our friends, neighbours and the people we know at work. Surrender is simply about being where the Lord wants us to be – to have no agenda of our own, except to do his will.

An important aspect of this is that we need to know God. When a couple stand at the altar, they are surrendering themselves to each other: they would not surrender themselves to someone they didn’t know! So before we can really surrender ourselves to God, we need to know him personally. For this, it is especially helpful to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to us the love God has for us, and to read the Scriptures which will tell us this, too – we need to know that even if we feel we have failed, God loves each one of us

passionately. We also need to experience his presence in our daily lives, so it is good to develop the habit of simply talking to the Lord frequently and in a familiar way about everyday matters, always asking for guidance and spending time listening to him. In this way, we will come to see him as our closest friend whom we can always trust.

‘Mothers Prayers’

For a long while, I had felt a growing desire to pray for children in a more committed way. I thought of the world in which my nine grandchildren were growing up, and I wanted to do something; but I felt so helpless and small compared with all the problems in today’s society. Around this time, my sister-in-law, who is also a grandmother, told me that she too felt called to pray for her children. So, feeling that this prompting could well be coming from God, we prayed together every day for a month, asking for his guidance.

Incredibly, this led to a prayer movement called ‘Mothers Prayers’ which, after just a few years, now has thousands of groups and contacts in over eighty countries.² Even more amazing is that it has spread around the world without our initiating any publicity: we only ever give talks to groups or visit countries when we are invited. Whenever I feel tempted to contact an organisation to speak of our work, I hold myself in check! I choose to surrender to God, and wait for him to send us the invitations he would prefer.

² See our website www.mothersprayers.org. An offshoot has grown up, called ‘Fathers Prayers’: see www.fathersprayers.org. There is also a movement to help young people, called ‘Children in Faith’.

Surrendering our children

For those who have not been involved with ‘Mothers Prayers’, let me explain what we do. Each week, in our prayer group, we begin by inviting the Holy Spirit to inspire our meetings, asking for protection, praising and acknowledging the majesty of God, and reading from Scripture. After this, we unite our prayers with all ‘Mothers Prayers’ groups around the world – a mighty prayer army!

Then comes the most important part of our meeting. One by one, we kneel at the table and place the names of our children at the foot of the cross, recognising that we cannot do anything to change their lives but that we know that he can. As we offer our child into his care, we say a little prayer from the heart. Something like: ‘Lord, I know that you love my child far more than I could possibly love him, he belongs to you more than to me, and you can change things that I can’t. So I place him now into your care.’ This is another part of our surrender. We ask God to be God not only of our lives, but also of the lives of our children.

Since ‘Mothers Prayers’ began, we have heard of so many answers to our prayers. They have included big things like children coming off drugs or returning home after they have been missing for several years. There have also been many answers to prayers that are not so dramatic but are still wonderful: bullying at school that has stopped, children getting a place at the school of their choice after at first being refused, and generally more peace in the family. When we are asked to pray for a child, we pray on behalf of the mother. We

have learned not to worry so much any more. This is because we surrender our problems to God and always try to remind ourselves not to take them back again! We remember his promise, 'Ask and you shall receive' (Mt 7:7), and also his invitation, 'Come to me, all you who labour and are heavily burdened and I will give you rest' (Mt 11:28).

Surrendering the situation

We will always have to make some choices in our lives, because we have been given the dignity of having a free will. Often we are not able to control the circumstances of our lives, but we are able to choose how we *accept* them. I know two women who had been deserted by their husbands. They had no choice in the matter, and they were both distraught, suffering terrible feelings of anger, rejection, disbelief and even guilt, thinking perhaps it was somehow their fault. One of them, whom I will call 'Mary', came to understand that to harbour all these negative feelings would only turn her into a bitter, angry and vindictive person. She surrendered all her feelings to the Lord, along with the whole situation, and she asked for the grace to forgive. This set her free and she became calm and able to start a new life in peace. The other woman, however, chose to remain angry. 'Joan' took every opportunity to speak badly about her husband, and her greatest delight was to try to bring him into disrepute. This not only affected her character, it also affected her health.

I have seen this in people who have had a terminal illness. Some become close to the Lord. Others become bitter and ask, 'Why me?' – and I feel so sad for them and for their families. My own mother had a massive heart attack and stroke and was unable to move.

Yet she was a wonderful example of surrender, and the nurses said that there was something different about her room. Although she could barely make herself understood, she was still guiding us even from her bed. How valuable to the world are the prayers of the elderly!

For everyone

I do believe that the gift of surrender is for everyone, and that all of us are being called to come closer to God through this. For most people, surrendering to God will not bring about any immediate change in their lifestyle, or at any rate the changes will be gradual. The Lord will take us by the hand and lead us step by step. He will put us in touch with the right people who will help us. Whatever our calling, he will confirm it, change it or deepen it, depending on what he knows is best for us. He will use us for his purpose so as to help others.

It will be unnecessary to keep worrying and asking what to do or what will happen. All we need is just to keep praying and carry on with our life. He will give us little reassurances that he is there and that all is well. He will speak in our innermost being, perhaps through a thought, an image or words that come to mind, a verse of Scripture, or other people. We will get to know his voice. And if we are not clear about what we must do, we should simply pray and ask him. And wait patiently until it does become clear. He will never let us go astray.

To be ‘responding’ people

I have come to learn that the more quickly I surrender my feelings of pain and hurt to God, the sooner my peace is restored and I feel the joy of his closeness. But it is also important and necessary to renew our act of surrender frequently – even every day, as the evil one will always be there to try to lead us away from surrender to God. Life will continue to have pain and trials, but we will never lose our peace if we remain focused on God’s will. And I have experienced that it is quite possible actually to feel JOY amidst the pain, in the knowledge that all is well because everything is in his hands. Joy is quite different from happiness: it is not dependent on situations or other people, but remains with us even during the problems in our lives. It comes from knowing that whatever happens, God is there to hold us close to him, and this is what gives us inner peace.

If I were asked to sum up what I feel are the results of my surrender to the will of God, I would say ‘FREEDOM’! Freedom from fear and worry – about change, the future, making decisions, and what other people think. I have learned that all striving and uncertainties will cease if we become *responding* people instead of initiators. He guides each one of us in the way that is right for us, according to our personality, our circumstances, and the plans he has for each one of us: ‘I alone know the plans I have for you, plans to bring you prosperity and not disaster, plans to bring about the future you hope for’ (Jer 29:11). All he is waiting for is our ‘YES’.