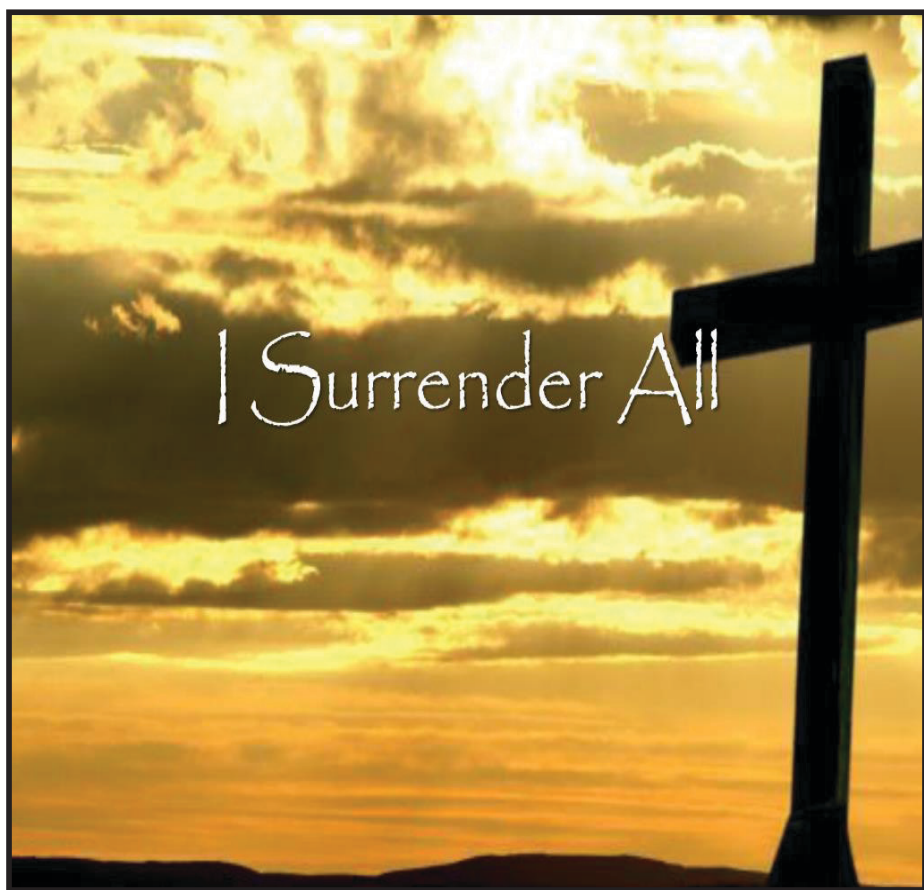


THE SURRENDERED LIFESTYLE



Father Cedric Pisegna, C.P.

A LIFESTYLE OF SURRENDER TO GOD

I believe the virtue of self-surrender to God is the *fundamental act* of a Christian. Disciples are those who follow the Master in humility. Following Jesus implies yielding and surrendering to him. Discipleship is a journey of initial and ongoing conversion/ self-emptying.

Perhaps this is the major life lesson we are meant to learn: *Life isn't about usurping control but relinquishing control to the one who created us.*

When we die, we will have to surrender our self and give to God our very life. We will eventually have to let go of everything we now hold dear. We will have to let go of our gifts, intellect, memories, possessions, body and even our relationship with self. Developing the yielding lifestyle now will make it easier to abandon ourselves to God when our time comes.

JESUS

The venerable Anne Catherine Emmerich was a German nun who bore the stigmata. She had remarkable visions of the life and passion of Jesus which are documented in a four volume set *The Life of Jesus Christ*. I have read these volumes a number of times. Her depiction of Jesus' Gethsemane experience and crucifixion are intense and gripping. In her visions, she writes of the inner anguish and thoughts Jesus had in Gethsemane. Here is an excerpt:

No tongue can express the horror, the anguish that overwhelmed the soul of Jesus when the angels showed him the sufferings he was about to go through. He had to atone for each type of sin committed by humanity. Each type and degree of sin was met with a different type and degree of suffering. The thought of each instrument of torture made him shudder. All the tortures to come filled Jesus with such horror that a bloody sweat started from the pores of his sacred body.

Imagine the anguish and suffering Jesus went through. In my estimation, Jesus went through two passions. There was the actual physical scourging and crucifixion. But there was also the anticipatory, mental passion of worry, distress, and extreme fear. He suffered so greatly that his sweat was like great drops of blood! Scientists have completed studies about this and concluded that when a person's anguish is so intense because of a terrifying event in the near future, blood can actually seep forth through the pores. Make no mistake, no one in history has ever had to face greater anticipatory anxiety and embrace a more horrible fate than Jesus of Nazareth. He faced it bravely even though he knew what was coming.

Throughout his life, Jesus surrendered to God. It began with his "kenosis" or self-emptying when he became a human. It continued throughout his life of self-sacrifice and prayer. It was said of him, "Sacrifice and offerings you did not desire, Lo, I come to do your will O God." (Ps. 40:6-8) Jesus (the Word from all eternity) first surrendered by becoming human and being born. This surrender was a profound self-emptying. Then, he yielded to God in his youth by being obedient to his parents. He humbled himself by submitting to the baptism of sinners. He abandoned himself to God in the desert by fasting and resisting the temptations of the evil one. He continued his surrender by not succumbing to the crowds or even his disciples' ideas of what the Messiah should be. Now, here in this garden, he reversed the effects of the "No" said in another garden (Eden) by his profound and costly "Yes" to God. A lifetime of "yesses" culminated in this final ratification of total surrender. Jesus did not falter. His kingly royalty and priestly nobility showed forth more than ever with these simple, yet costly words, "Not my will, but yours be done." The surrender made, Jesus rose from prayer and would be led away like a lamb to his slaughter. Jesus would not resist or fight the sufferings. He had already accepted them in his "Yes" to God.

Paul wrote of Jesus' self-emptying in his letter to the Philippians.

Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of humans. He humbled himself further and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. (Phil. 2: 6-8)

This early liturgical hymn is now prayed in the Liturgy of the Hours many times each week. We Passionists begin our morning and evening prayer, "At the name of Jesus, every knee must bend in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth, and every tongue proclaim to the Glory of God the Father that Jesus Christ is Lord." These words come from the Philippian hymn of praise to Jesus for his *kenosis*, a Greek word for his self-emptying surrender.

Of course the opposite of self-emptying is being "full of yourself," or selfishness. In our culture today, selfishness and pride are epidemic. So many think the world revolves around them. People feel entitled to things. They feel they deserve blessings they didn't earn or merit. They are inconsiderate and think only of themselves. This disregard for the rights and feelings of others is the essence of disobedience and sin. Sin, at its core, is a turning away from God's will. Surrender, in a nutshell, is when we realign ourselves with God's will and submit our wills to God. This can be done by celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation and also in simple, private prayer. Yielding is also done in the many simple, yet profound choices we make throughout the day.

Paul wrote the Romans, "I appeal to you, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies (selves) as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship." (Ro. 12:1) What sacrifice is acceptable to God? God wants your will, your self, and your obedience. Giving yourself is a reoccurring lifestyle of self-surrender to God.

SELF-SURRENDER

What then is surrender? I think we've all seen movies where one army marches against another. Perhaps it is a western where the army is pitted against the Indians. As the battle rages on, the stronger force begins to win. Sooner or later the weaker force will retreat and wave the white flag as a sign of surrender. I remember when I used to play the card game Black Jack. The object is to get as close to twenty-one as you can without going over. Once you go over twenty-one, the player must surrender his or her cards back to the dealer.

In these instances, surrender has a negative connotation. It has the idea of giving up, quitting, or losing. Often people avoid surrender in the spiritual life because they think it means losing. Actually, abandoning yourself to God is quite the opposite. Surrender is not about losing, but about winning. It is not about giving up, but giving in completely. It is not about quitting, but about doing, accomplishing, and being proactive.

Father Damien was a priest from Belgium and lived in the 1800's. When the Bishop asked for volunteers to minister to the lepers on Molokai, Damien surrendered. He willfully went to the island and ministered among the diseased for some sixteen years. The people saw his love for them which resulted in many converts. The people who had been destitute and forsaken finally had spiritual care. Damien eventually contracted the highly contagious disease of leprosy. He died at the young age of forty-nine and was declared a saint in 2009.

Surrendered people are some of the most proactive, passionate people alive. They are the ones who get things done and make a difference. Surrendered people take care of elderly parents even though they have plenty to do in their own lives. They raise difficult children, some with severe handicaps. They don't shrink from selflessly supporting their families. They get involved in the community and participate in ministries at church. I know that my joining religious life,

studying and becoming a priest, preaching, writing, and producing for television and radio all flow from my surrender to God. Far from being a passive giving up, surrender is a passionate giving in! I like to say, “Don’t just live passively, live *Passionately!*”

In the Gospels, Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James, and John who were fisherman. The Scriptures tell us they “immediately left their nets and followed Jesus.” (Mk 1:18) This also meant leaving their father and boat behind. When Matthew was called, “he left everything, rose, and followed Jesus.” (Lk 5:28) This initial surrender led them to eventually “turning the world upside down.” Surrender may involve leaving some unnecessary things behind so you can focus on what is truly important. While it may include moments of solitude, prayer, and the avoidance of sin, it always involves action and service. Surrender is the fundamental act of a disciple. It is a lifestyle of continuous, consistent giving of self.

The dictionary definition of “surrender” is “the yielding of your person and forces to another.” Specifically in our case, it is the abandonment of our self and resources into the hands of God. Surrender is selflessness. The opposite of this and the root of sin is selfishness. In order to participate fully in the sacred walk we must abandon, submit, and yield ourselves to God. It involves the relinquishing of control and the renunciation of some of our resources. This really is the heart of authentic discipleship. Many claim to be disciples without a true surrender. Jesus said, “Follow me.” As you read this, I pray you will make a deeper surrender of your heart, mind, will, body, sexuality, resources, and self to God!

TAKE LORD, RECEIVE

St. Ignatius of Loyola lived in the 1500’s. As a young man he fought in the war for Spain against France. He dreamed of getting promoted in the military. His dreams were shattered along with his leg when he was hit by a French cannonball.

He was in the hospital recuperating for a long time and had lots of time to think and reflect on his life. It was there that he realized his goals were misguided. He began to turn to God fully and experienced a deep conversion. Often it is through a bottoming out experience, a suffering, a broken relationship, or a mortal sin that people come to conversion. Simply put, “conversion is a movement of return to God.” (*Catechism #1490*) Sufferings often lead us to greater depth with God.

While in the hospital, Ignatius surrendered to God. He wrote a prayer of surrender called “The Suscipe” which has become famous. I invite you to pray.

Take Lord, and receive all of my liberty,
my memory, my understanding,
and my entire will.

All I have and call my own.

You have given all to me.

To you, Lord, I return it.

Everything is yours; do with it what you will.

Give me only your love and your grace,

That is enough for me.

Ignatius actively continued his surrender and in time became the founder of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits). They are the largest religious community in the Church today. The Jesuits have founded numerous universities, such as Georgetown and Boston College, specializing in education. These priests teach, preach, and offer spiritual direction. They have had a tremendous impact in our Church over the centuries. The motto of the Jesuits is *Ad majorem Dei gloriam*, or “To the greater glory of God.” Through the centuries, multitudes of people have been helped, and God’s kingdom has advanced all because of one man’s surrender.

The founder of the Passionists, St. Paul of the Cross, frequently wrote about self-surrender. He was a great mystic and spiritual director. He didn’t write any books but wrote scores of letters to those he directed. Many of these letters have been compiled into a large, two-volume book. If he were

alive today, he would be busy on the Internet directing people via email. Once he wrote to Teresa Palozzi, "Make frequent acts of resignation to the will of God. Abandon yourself to the will of God for God has you in mind."

Once when I was making a retreat, I noticed a painting on the wall of my room. The painting was of the angel Gabriel visiting a young girl. It was that precious moment after Gabriel announced that Mary would bear the Son of God. Mary was bowing in humble submission and said, "Yes." This wonderful moment is called the Annunciation. Mary surrendered to God's plan and will for both her life and humanity and subsequently conceived God's son. Because of her "Yes" (fiat) humanity was redeemed and restored. Mary's "Yes" reversed Eve's "No." Mary surrendered when she said, "I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done unto me according to your word." (Lk 1:38)

Paul the apostle was a man who constantly surrendered himself to God. When he spoke of himself, he used the term *doulos*. (Tit. 1:1) Usually this word is translated "servant," but the more accurate translation is "slave." He realized that his entire life had been redeemed. He had been ransomed from his sins and death. Now he lived to serve Jesus as a slave. A slave is someone who has no life apart from his or her master. Paul wrote, "You do not belong to yourself. You were bought with a price. Glorify God with your body." (1 Cor. 6:19-20)

No one said following Jesus was easy. In fact, Jesus said, "Count the cost" of being a disciple. You may not be called to the vows of chastity, obedience, and poverty, but other vocations are also hard. I just received an email from a mother who lost her teenage son to bone cancer. She suffered with him through countless operations, chemo, and finally his death. Her suffering was deep and ongoing. Any of you who are parents and are reading this have your own stories to tell. Some have gone through divorce, lost a spouse to death, or have had to deal with other sufferings. No vocation is easy, but all vocations are worthy.

Jesus taught, "Take up your cross *daily* and follow me." (Lk. 9:23) The sacred walk means that we must surrender our lives to Jesus every day. Authentic discipleship has many demands. We must courageously face the challenges our vocations present and bravely go through them. God will fill our surrender with his presence and give us the victory.

GOD IS WORTHY

Always remember, we are not surrendering just for the sake of yielding our life. *We are giving our life to God.* God is always the subject of our surrender. God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit (Trinity) are so worthy of our whole being.

When we pray the Liturgy of the Hours, one of the passages we pray is from the Book of Revelation. "O Lord our God, you are worthy to receive glory and honor and power. For you have created all things; by your will they came to be and were made." (Rev. 4:11) This redemption hymn exalts God for willing us into being. Consider that you did not just happen to be. God had you in mind before the world began and by an act of his will, you became. Your whole life and existence is because God wanted you to live.

In addition, God has redeemed us. We have all sinned and fall short of God's glory. God sent his son who has loved us unconditionally. Jesus is worthy of our surrender because of his immense and complete sufferings on our behalf. Jesus died for us on the cross and rose so we could possess eternal life. Any sin we have ever committed or failure we have experienced is forgiven when we ask. "As far as the east is from the west, so far has God put our sins from us." (Ps. 103:12) "I have cast your sins into the depths of the sea." (Mi. 7:19) I love to sing the song "There is a Wideness in God's Mercy." God's mercy is high, deep, and wide. God has forgiven us so we can eternally live with him in heaven!

God is full of virtue and integrity. God is light, and in God, there is no darkness. God is sheer goodness and knows no evil. God is love, patience, compassion, justice, and every

type of virtue. God is faithful from age to age. He is committed toward his creation and holds us ever in mind. God knows all things, sees everywhere, and is all powerful. Although he possesses awesome power, God is gentle, intimate, and approachable. God is breathtakingly glorious and ravishingly beautiful. All his works display his creativity, intelligence, and beauty. Think of the vast array of stars, snow-capped mountains, deep blue oceans, the Grand Canyon, little babies, the multitudes of people. There are over 8.2 billion people on the face of the earth and growing daily! God created play, laughter, and the ability to enjoy. He inspires us with hope of the better day to come. Everything that is right and good and holy is found in God. God's character has been and always will be impeccable. God never changes and is completely stable. God is without beginning or end. God is an eternal rock worthy of our complete and constant devotion.

At every Mass, we echo the words of Isaiah in his astounding vision of God when we pray, "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of Hosts. Heaven and Earth are full of your glory! Hosanna in the Highest..."

God guides us in his providence. He helps us when we call to him. He sustains us, watches over us, and guards us in our journey. God is a shepherd who holds us close to his heart. God's Spirit has left the glories of heaven to walk with us. God would never harm us, but always has our best interest in mind. He is our true father and best friend. God ennoble us by working through us to reach out and help others. His love is so strong that not even death can separate us from him.

On every level, God's multi-faceted and radiant personage is absolutely and completely worthy of our total devotion and self-emptying surrender. He is worthy of our utter trust and reverent worship. Jesus gave his all to God because he appreciated God's wonderful character. We also should spend time in worship, praise, and in awe of God's majesty. The only response must be the surrender of our heart and

will to God who is all and in all. One of my favorite quotes from St. Francis of Assisi is when he speaks of God in this way: “My God and my all!”

This Scripture gives us a glimpse of what is occurring in heaven right now:

Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to God who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before God who is seated on the throne and worship God who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne and sing... (Rev. 4: 9-10)

When we surrender to God, we are only giving back to God what he has given us in the first place: our very life. Every heartbeat, every breath, every moment is a gift from God to us. As St. Ignatius prayed, “You have given all to me; now I return it.” God never forces or coerces our surrender. Rather, he attracts, woos, and captivates us with his love. The yielding of our hearts to God is always our choice. Blessed are they who know the joy of radical self-surrender to God.

Some are afraid that if they surrender to God, God will make them do something they don't want to do. Perhaps you will be called to be a missionary and lead an expedition down the mosquito-infested, piranha laden Amazon jungle. God will never dupe you or violate you. God knows your heart and will be gentle with you. Fear not! God always has your best interest in mind.

STEP BY STEP

Self-surrender is at the heart of the Twelve-Step Program and of any enduring change. We can change ourselves to some degree by our own efforts, but significant, lasting change can come only through the relinquishing of our will to God who has the power to change us. These are the first three steps of the Twelve-Step Program:

- Admit you have a problem and that you are powerless over it.
- Believe that God has the power and will to help you.
- Make a decision to turn your will and life over to the care of God.

It is fascinating to observe that many who had fallen away from the faith or had little interest in God actually find him through their addiction! Sometimes it is the drinking or shopping or out of control eating that leads people back to the vestibule of God. They have tried everything else, so now they try God. Given time and an ounce of trust, they find that God actually works! Many of these people have conversions, come back to church, and end up as huge supporters of our retreat center as well as churches of every denomination. At the Easter Vigil, just before the Gospel, the deacon sings the “Exultet.” In this triumphant song of rejoicing we hear, “O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer!” Because of God’s mercy, our greatest flaws and sins lead to our greatest blessings.

When I counsel people, I hear about addictions of every sort. I invite people to look within and try to get to the root of what is causing the addictive behaviors. Behaviors such as excessive drinking, lusting, gambling, or shopping all have roots. Some people may simply want to escape some outer pain. Usually people are trying to avoid some inner pain. I often find that the root of an addiction has to do with some sort of self-rejection that leads to self-sabotage. Most are insecure, feel inadequate, have a low self-esteem, or poor self/body image. This leads to feelings of self-hate and unwanted behaviors that spiral out of control.

Along with psychological reasons, there are also family system issues. A person may come from a family where drinking was prevalent. Or, there may be struggles with a person’s spouse or children. Many families wrestle with dysfunction. In addition, a person may be neglecting his or her spiritual side. Instead of pursuing their craving for God,

that person spends time craving another substance and pursues that desire.

Recovery involves embracing these painful, inner issues and moving through them to greater self-care and acceptance. While it is important to have some type of self-understanding, the addiction must be met head on at the level of behaviors. It is the addictive behaviors that must be addressed and dealt with. Unless you can change patterns of craving and acting out, the addiction will continue.

I have been a Catholic priest for over 33 years and have heard thousands of confessions. In this sacrament people come to God and open their hearts in a deep surrender. It takes honesty to identify the sinful areas and humility to confess them. As people receive the touch of forgiveness, gradual transformation and change occurs. God is always ready to forgive, we just must be ready to yield ourselves to his will.

ABANDON YOURSELF

As you read now, I invite you to make a full and total surrender of your life to God. Give God your eyes and what you choose to look at. Offer to God your mouth and what you say (and eat). Sacrifice your time to God daily. Give the first fruits of your income back to God. Present your heart, your innermost being to God. Submit your will and your choices to God. Serve God by your virtuous behavior. Offer to God your body and sexuality. God is so worthy of our full and complete devotion. "Present your bodies to God as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God." (Ro. 12:1)

Are you out of balance in any one area? Usually people have one main area they struggle with. Some are stuck in lust. Others are angry and resentful. Some wrestle with an addiction to some substance or person. Many are dealing with self-rejection and self-sabotage of one form or another. Some feel hopeless and lazy and need passion. Most have a relationship that causes them to overreact. Others can't

forgive themselves. I invite you to lift up to God your one main area (or multiple areas). Surrender yourself to God right now. You will feel a new strength and ability to move forward.

My God and my all,

I want to move forward in every area of my life.

You are worthy of all that I am.

I surrender my entire self to you.

Take the areas of my life that aren't dedicated to you.

I give you permission to work in me
and transform me.

I will always love you, Lord. Amen!

I invite those of you who are Catholic to continue your surrender by celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Confession is a time of healing and receiving forgiveness. This gracious sacrament will help you begin anew and move forward. I read a book in the seminary about reconciliation titled *To Walk Together Again*. The journey of our life was never meant to be travelled alone. If you haven't been to confession in a while, you can choose to go behind the screen or face to face. Pray the sign of the cross and tell the priest how long it has been since you last celebrated confession. Then tell him your one main area, along with some other sins that you need to confess. He will offer you counsel and prescribe a penance (to help draw you closer to Christ – not a punishment). You may then pray an act of contrition that you know (formal prayer or one from your heart). The priest will then dismiss you with God's peace.

Surrendering to God is an act of your will. Yielding to God is "self-emptying." You simply decide to give yourself to God over and over again in every temptation, circumstance and situation. Your consistent firm choice becomes a lifestyle of deep commitment to God. Every day, as long as you live, Through the ups and the downs, adopt this lifestyle of grace. As you surrender to God, you will be fruitful and be prepared for your final surrender, the moment of your death.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Presently, Fr. Cedric preaches retreats and missions throughout the United States and Canada, ministering out of the Passionist retreat complex in Houston, Texas. He has preached over 500 missions for 35 years. Fr. Cedric produces a program for TV and Radio, *Live with Passion!*, which presently airs nationally and internationally on the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), EWTN, and other networks. He has numerous CDs and DVDs on Christian living and has authored twenty-five books.

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