

PASTORAL NOTE

IT'S ALL IN THE SURRENDER



Several years ago, I was making a 30-day Ignatian silent retreat when a few days into the retreat I got a hankering for ice cream.

As I walked alone into an ice cream parlor, I noticed a young couple in front of me having an intense conversation while they ordered their ice cream. As I listened, I discovered they were discussing the Eucharist, and, specifically, Eucharistic adoration. This caught my attention. They did not recognize me as a bishop since I was not wearing clerics while on my retreat in the hot Omaha summer.



As we both walked down the sidewalk, I could continue to overhear their conversation. It became apparent that the woman was fascinated that her date went to adoration. He shared how he would go two or three times a week with friends; she was amazed. He then went on to describe how he and his friends would drive to adoration in total silence to prepare themselves. Baffled, she asked, “why would they do that?”



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He stopped, and I stopped, pretending to be looking at some buildings. After thinking deeply, he then simply stated, “It is because we are going to meet the Lord, and we must be prepared to give ourselves to him. It is all in the surrender of ourselves to him.” My heart leapt with joy, and I wanted to cry out, “Young man, you are not far from the Kingdom of God!”

My providential encounter with that couple provided the theme, “it is all in the surrender,” for the rest of my retreat. The Father, in his unconditional love for me, provided an encounter for me that to this day is one of the most life-changing experiences I have had. The young man, taking his date out for ice cream, had no idea the gift that he gave me on that sweltering summer day.

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Surrender in the Christian Life

Every real relationship, if it is to grow, requires surrender, the gift of self. To love another person requires that we turn away from seeking only our own good, and, flowing from the total gift of self we have first offered to God, we sacrifice ourselves for their flourishing.

I think of this every time I am blessed to celebrate a wedding of two faithful Catholic young people. The Church teaches that, in the sacrament of matrimony, it is the couples who are what we call the “ordinary ministers” of the sacrament, cooperating with God to confer it upon one another, while the ordained minister of the Church serves as a witness, because it is their vowed act of surrender to one another which forges the lasting union of marriage.

I encourage you to read or re-read the Catholic wedding vows, to let their beauty resonate with you again. At their heart, they articulate this: “I no longer live for me. You, and what you need, are the driving force of my life. I will choose this more than anything else. I will do whatever is needed for the sake of your good. You are worth it.”

One of the reasons marriages are in decline today is that the prevailing culture promotes focusing on ourselves and fulfilling our desires before sacrificing for others. Because of this cultural background and our fallen nature, it takes heroic determination and supernatural grace to limit our freedom, and abdicate “control,” to experience the deeper blessings which can only arise from narrowing our options.

Today, instead, “what I want” is the dominant driving cultural force. One of





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the intellectual fathers of post-modernity, Friedrich Nietzsche, put voice to this secular mentality when he proclaimed that the path to human flourishing is the “will to power,” finding personal fulfillment through the total ability to subjugate others to my wishes. Jean-Paul Sartre, an atheist philosopher from the first half of the 20th century, famously concluded his play, *No Exit*, by having one of the main characters explain the demonic conclusion of this philosophy: “Hell is other people!”

If the goal of life is to accomplish my own will, then others, with their own needs, dreams, and desires, will always get in the way.

This is the anti-Gospel. It is the exact opposite of what Jesus Christ shows us is the way to personal greatness when he offers the real path to human flourishing, “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 16:25).

Surrender is at the core of our Catholic faith, and it is God himself who has led the way and “gone first.” Jesus tells us, “This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again. This command I have received from my Father” (John 10:17-18).

One of the central mysteries of our faith, the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, reveals that God continues to surrender himself each time the Mass is celebrated. He has given himself to us completely — body, blood, soul, and divinity — until the end of time. St. Francis of Assisi, contemplating these mysteries, used to cry out in the streets, “Love is not loved!” That is because our only response to what God does for us in the sacraments is to pour out our own lives completely to him in return.



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Archdiocesan Discernment Process: Trustful Surrender to the Holy Spirit

If we are to grow as disciples and bear fruit as a Church, we must learn how to surrender to God again. To give love, for love. Surrender is a lifelong process, in which we surrender our hearts, minds, wills, bodies and souls to the Trinity. Over the last six months, as we have journeyed through the Archdiocesan-wide Discernment Process, we have been seeking to learn how to surrender to the will of the Father. Through the Advent retreat, we have come to first understand his will for each of us by hearing again The Story of salvation history. Through listening in our parish discernment gatherings, we have been seeking to hear God's plan for our Church, parishes and as disciples in this time.

Now, our Archdiocesan Discernment Process will conclude with its culminating experience: our Archdiocesan Discernment Event. Your pastors and I have invited over 500 disciples from every parish and other institutions, apostolates, orders and movements from across the archdiocese to this three-day event from March 25-27 to collectively seek after the Lord's will and hear his voice for our archdiocese in this new apostolic age.

To prepare for this event, **I am inviting you, and all the faithful of the Archdiocese of Denver, to pray the Surrender Novena, beginning on March 17.** I have sent copies of this novena to each parish, where you may pick them up. I discovered the novena a few years ago, and I have prayed it several times. This novena is a chance for all of us to surrender anew to Jesus. It is a chance to put him first in our lives, and the more we surrender to him, the more our love will grow for him, the Father and the Holy Spirit. And because we love God more, we will love others and see the face of Christ in every person we encounter. This prayer of surrender will also increase our desire to carry out the mission of Jesus in today's world that so desperately needs witnesses to the transforming power of the Gospel.

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I believe that the spiritual action of our entire archdiocese opening ourselves to the will of the Father will clear the way for incredible fruit to be borne in the Archdiocesan Discernment Event itself and as we move forward from that occasion.

This novena will conclude on the opening day of our Archdiocesan Discernment Event, the Feast of the Annunciation, which is when we celebrate Mary's act of surrender that ushered in the most climactic moments of salvation history. On that day, over 2,000 years ago, the entire story of humanity reached a moment of expectant anticipation, waiting for the words of the Virgin Mary: "*Let it be done unto me.*" Mary listens to God's plan for salvation and surrenders herself to the will of the Father, showing her willingness to be his servant. Human history is forever changed in her surrender, her "yes" to God's plan.

The Church, in all of the incredible ways it has impacted the world and culture over these last 2,000 years, in its great saints, in the "life to the full" so many have found in Jesus Christ and his Church — all of it is the fruit of one profound moment of surrender.

Another moment of trust and surrender would be required of Mary's betrothed, Joseph, when, after discovering her pregnancy, he planned to save them both from shame by "divorcing her quietly" (Matthew 1:19). An angel appears to Joseph and, encouraging him to not be afraid to follow God's plan, reveals how all of this was the action of the Holy Spirit. Then, the Gospel says, "When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took his wife into his home" (Matthew 1:24).





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Mary and Joseph display a key characteristic of authentic disciples: they hear the voice of the Lord and respond by surrendering and following his plan, abandoning their own expectations. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

Our local phase of the Synod on Synodality, what we have called our Archdiocesan Discernment Process, has itself been an act of surrender. We did not plan to do a synod, but what at first seemed like an inconvenience, through obedience to the invitation of the Holy Father, has become a remarkable opportunity to recommit ourselves to the fundamental surrender all of us are called to as disciples of Jesus Christ.

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“Put Out Into Deep Water” (Luke 5:4)

This call to surrender is reminiscent for me as an archbishop of an encounter that Jesus had with one of his apostles along the Lake of Gennesaret, when Jesus gets into Peter’s boat, uninvited, and begins to tell him what to do. First, he exhorts him to put out a short distance from shore, then, after teaching the crowds more, with Peter having patiently waited the whole time, tells him to put out into the “deep water” (Luke 5:4) and throw out his nets for a catch.

Peter responds warily, “Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but at your command I will lower the nets,” (Luke 5:5). He immediately catches so many fish that his partners need to come to help him with an additional boat.

Peter knew how to catch fish. He knew what he was doing. Yet it was not until he was following the Lord’s command that he caught anything. The fruit he received that day in the catch of fish was more abundant than he ever imagined possible.





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So many of us have a preconceived idea of what we want to do to follow God or help the Church. So many of us feel like we have been fishing all night, working on our own power, and catching nothing as we watch discouraging trends in our culture and Church.

But as Peter's encounter with Jesus teaches us, we will only "catch" anything when we surrender to God and his plan. This is the only way to discover the fruitfulness we are called to in our individual lives, families, parishes, and schools.

Our Archdiocesan Discernment Process has become a significant invitation from God to put down our own plans, agendas, and notions of "what I want to do for God," and humbly ask him what is on his heart, to follow where he leads; to "put out into deeper water" and lower our nets. What remains for us is to hear his voice, to surrender and to follow.

As this process reaches its prayerful conclusion, I look forward to you joining me in opening ourselves to what God is doing in our individual lives as disciples and across our local Church through the Surrender Novena. Make praying the novena a part of your Lenten pilgrimage. May it bear much fruit in our lives, our parishes, and our archdiocese!



+ Samuel J. Aquila
Archbishop of Denver