

Introduction

SAVING MOTHERHOOD

[Women] will be saved through motherhood, provided [they] persevere in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.

~1 Timothy 2:15

One of my great dreams in life was to become a mother. I have vivid memories of playing with both my baby dolls and my baby brothers, lost in the pretend world of motherhood, yearning with everything in me to have my own child. My sister and I practically paid the neighbors to let us babysit, and we were more than happy to clean kitchens, sweep floors, or do any other household chores for the privilege of holding their babies. Even as a child, the smell of a baby left me intoxicated. I was completely obsessed.

I was nothing less than convinced that I would be a wonderful, competent mother. My mother had ten children, and I wanted six. I ended up with three girls and two boys, plus a little soul in heaven. It was not exactly what I expected, but then nothing about motherhood has

been. I didn't expect it to be so intensely gratifying. And I certainly didn't expect it to be so challenging.

Our first daughter, Kara, was born two weeks early following a long day of last-minute Christmas shopping. Due to arrive on January 6, she came on Christmas Eve during a bitter winter freeze. I could hardly wait to get her home to settle into our new life together. Eagerly anticipating her arrival, I had practiced a morning ritual for months that included going into her nursery and bringing a tiny outfit to my just-waking husband, Bernie, to "dance" on the bed, trying to picture the little person who would be wearing it soon. It was all going to be smiles and roses.

It took mere days after her birth to figure out that I knew almost nothing about mothering. It had never occurred to me that I might have a baby with severe colic, and Kara's screaming left me at a total loss. Nothing I tried seemed to help. Neither walking the floors for hours at night nor rocking her did a thing to calm her down—nor did the colic drops, the warm water bottle, or the doctor's last-resort suggestion of placing her tummy down on our running dryer, over which I stood sometimes for an hour or more in the middle of the night trying to soothe her little stomach. So much for my confidence in my competence! I quickly learned that if I was going to survive this thing called motherhood, I'd better start to *pray*. Pray I did—and I've been praying nonstop ever since! And like every mother who's ever lived, I've had *plenty* to pray about.

Each phase of motherhood has brought new challenges and surprises, and each stage has taught me how to pray in deeper and more soul-surrendering ways, for both my children and myself. I have learned over nearly

thirty years that prayer, like motherhood, is dynamic and can effect change in us and in the world around us. Both of these outcomes are good and necessary as we move forward in the spiritual journey and in the vocation of motherhood.

The life of a praying mother often involves two specific types of prayer: the prayer of petition and the prayer of surrender. In the prayer of petition, we pray *for* our children or ourselves, asking God to intervene in our lives in a particular way. This may be the way we pray most often as mothers. Thankfully, I've seen quite a few miracles happen through petitioning prayer, some of which I will share in this book. Those are the prayer stories that people love to hear because they build our faith and trust in God and in his amazing power.

But what happens when our appeals seemingly go unanswered, or when life unfolds in a way that we consider negative or even disastrous, no matter how hard we pray or how many times we ask God for something? It is in these instances that God invites us to learn the power of prayerful surrender. It's a prayer that can bring real peace, and it often brings us to deeper conversion and inner transformation. It sometimes takes many hard lessons and countless wrestling matches with God to learn to surrender, and it's something we must practice as we go. But surrendering prayer is worth leaning into and learning well because, in the end, learning to yield to God and say yes to him in whatever life brings changes *us*.

May It Be Done to Me According to Your Word (Lk 1:38)

What exactly is the prayer of surrender? It involves the ongoing practice of opening our hands to God and releasing ourselves and others to him in a way that permits grace to move. It includes developing the habit of giving up our attempts to control people and events by intentionally giving them to God. And it encompasses yielding our will to God's providential will through faith, inviting him to empower us to see our lives through his transcendent perspective instead of through the lens of our own limited human understanding. Learning the prayer of surrender is not a one-shot wonder. It takes much practice, perseverance, and patience, plus the example of those who have lived it extraordinarily well.

When considering surrendering prayer, there is no better example to ponder than Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Surely, the Blessed Mother had to surrender her Son to the Father in heaven repeatedly during his life, ultimately giving Jesus up in prayer on the Cross. The unfolding of the Son of God's life presented many formidable challenges for his Mother, and in each trial Mary had to learn to yield to God more fully. Each relinquishment was an act of love, and every surrender became an open space for *more* love. Therein lies the mystery of the prayer of surrender—a mystery we can learn at the feet of Mary.

The power of a mother's prayer consists in offering her child and herself to God in a way that makes *more* space for his love—a challenge that's easier said than done! It is a challenge we will consider at length in this book, using

scenes from Mary's life as our guide. We will follow the Blessed Mother from the annunciation to the Resurrection, seeing in each moment of her life with Christ what we can prayerfully glean from her example. We will learn how she submitted herself and her Son to the Father unceasingly and how her surrender made space for the expansion of God's infinite love in this all-too-imperfect world.

When I first became a wife and mother, I was pretty convinced that I could exert my will on my husband, my children, and the world around me and make them line up with my expectations. Truth be told, I was somewhat of a control freak, and I expected life to fall in line with my plans. When things didn't go my way, I became extremely angry, and I even got angry with God. Thankfully, life had a way of consistently teaching me two extremely important lessons: there is a God and it ain't me, and I am not in control. Does this ring a bell for you?

I look back with some fascination on my control-freak days because it's clear to me now that my stance concerning my life directly reflected my stance with God, which was, I love you, but my life will be according to *my* will. Such a stance is not uncommon in women, and it can manifest itself in any number of ways, evidenced through our attitudinal disposition toward God and those in our lives. We can attempt to exert our will on the world around us, wanting reality to line up with our wishes, and then find ourselves frustrated and angry when that doesn't happen. We are tempted to manipulate, dominate, or control so that things go our way, rejecting the Marian stance of active abandonment to God in favor of Eve's posture of grasping to get what she wanted. We've struggled with the same

darn problem ever since the Fall, beginning with Eve and continuing through the generations, and it can even show up in the way we pray. So much of our prayer life can be spent telling God what to do and how he should make our lives unfold according to our will.

We live in a world where we buy into the notion that we can—and have to!—have the whole thing planned and figured out. We lord it over our lives, and even our prayers, assuming that if we exert enough control over people, places, things—and God—we can maneuver them to our liking. Motherhood is one of the great gifts God has given to us to teach us that this is simply not true. It helps us conform ourselves to the reality that we are not in control and facilitates us learning the truth that God is in control. Further, it teaches us that we are not masters of our lives or the lives of others but rather called to be attentive servants to the good plans God has for us. We, like Mary, are called to be *handmaids* of the Lord and of his splendid plans, to which we are invited to say yes.

So, what exactly is this handmaid that Mary calls herself? Twice, Mary uses the word *handmaid* in Luke's gospel, both when giving her consent to the greatest announcement ever made (1:38) and when proclaiming her beautiful Magnificat to her cousin Elizabeth (1:48). In calling herself "handmaid," Mary identifies herself as a bondmaid of the Lord, as one bound as closely to God as a slave to its master. Mary is God's bondservant because she understands her utter dependence on him and she trusts in his power over her. Mary, who had the most intimate experience of God's personal presence and power ever manifested to a human being, describes that power to Elizabeth with the

words “greatness,” “holy,” “mercy,” “might,” and “help” (1:46–55). She knows that God can be relied upon to provide all that she needs, and it is clear to her that God, and not she, is in charge.

Control Versus Surrender

Frankly, admitting that we are not in control is a profoundly countercultural message today, even in the Christian church. “Helicopter parenting” has become “helicopter Christianity,” and we find ourselves inundated by the message that if we think, do, and pray all the right things, we’ll be guaranteed that our lives will go well. We buy into the message that we can have an assurance of a life that is full of only blessing and abundance, and then we find ourselves befuddled and despairing when our lives hit the skids.

One of the most popular books ever written on the prayer of Christian mothers, selling thirty million copies worldwide, emphasizes making extensive lists of every aspect of our children’s lives—listing everything we could possibly think of or imagine, even a year into the future—so we can cover every area in prayer, leaving nothing out. Focusing on *our* power, the book promises that if mothers pray hard enough and biblically enough, we can orchestrate the release of blessing into the lives of our children, sparing them loss and harm. The author even makes the audacious claim that during all the years that she and her prayer group covered their children in this type of prayer, they “never lost a single child—not to disease, accident, rebellion, ungodliness, or to the enemy’s plans.”¹

What planet were they living on, I wonder?

Let's be completely honest: Who doesn't wish there was a guarantee that if we pray a certain way, our children's lives will be full of blessing and prosperity, and free from harm? I certainly do! But this type of approach to prayer, also known as the "prosperity gospel," inadvertently turns prayer into a formula for success, a magical method that portends to enable us to control the outcomes of our children's lives and the world around us if we pray enough or do it just the right way. No wonder the book was so darn popular!

Such magical thinking does not line up with reality, and it's certainly not congruent with the message of Christianity, which is the message of the Cross. Furthermore, it doesn't line up with the life of Mary, the most blessed woman that ever lived, who watched her Son suffer a brutal, violent death upon the Cross. Mary's most exquisite blessing was not that she was given a "pass" on suffering but that she was permitted to participate in the Cross in a most profound and intimate manner. She found the greatest blessing precisely by uniting her deepest agony—watching her Son die upon the Cross—to her Son's own sacrificial offering, cooperating freely with salvific grace in bringing about the redemption of souls. We are invited to do the same whenever the Cross presents itself in our lives, turning our pain into a source of sanctification for ourselves and for others. It is thus that we "rejoice in our afflictions" (Rom 5:3; Col 1:24).

So, does embracing the Cross mean we shouldn't pray for our children, or that we should fatalistically accept whatever life sends, without asking God for miracles, conversions, and cures? Such an extreme position would be

folly and, if true, would eliminate the need for another book about prayer. Jesus instructs us to pray and to present our needs to him with boldness, persistence, and confidence (Mt 7:7; Mt 21:22; Jn 14:14).

While there is no cookie-cutter recipe for making life happen according to our prayers, we can and do see miraculous answers to prayer all the time, even when our prayers aren't answered in exactly the way we hoped or asked for. Thus, it is important to begin to behold the deeper miracles that happen when we pray, such as the miracle of learning to trust God and capitulate to him, resting in the knowledge that he loves us tenderly and particularly. Or perhaps we can appreciate the miracle of seeing the events in our lives through the eyes of *faith*, wherein we are given the supernatural ability to participate in God's own understanding, which sees this life for what it really is: a preparation for heaven and an opportunity to embrace human and divine love.

One of the most powerful answers I've ever received to prayer was the incredible conversion of my late husband, Bernie, for whom I'd prayed fervently for twenty-five long years. My many prayers for Bernie's conversion were answered in a way that was totally unexpected and unasked for—via his massive heart attack, near-death experience, and personal meeting with God in heaven. Bernie awoke from a six-week coma to communicate to me the details of his God encounter, telling me repeatedly, "You have no idea how much God loves you." He also spoke the sweetest words I'd ever heard him say: "I surrendered to God. . . . I have so much peace."

I spent the next six weeks by his side in the ICU praying doggedly for his physical healing and return home, believing we would together go into ministry just the way I'd always dreamed, sharing the message of God's profound love he had received on the other side. It wasn't until the very end of Bernie's life that I embraced the truth that he had received from God exactly the healing he needed—the ultimate healing—which was to be readied for heaven and called to his eternal home. Though my prayers weren't answered in the way I had desired or requested, God used that experience of deep suffering and purification to teach me that he can be trusted and that he does not—cannot—abandon us. He used our journey through sickness and death for his good and merciful purposes, which included healing the wounds in Bernie's soul, and mine, in very different but necessary ways.

I learned through that experience that God's thoughts are not our thoughts and his ways are not our ways—but that, indeed, his ways are *good*. God's plans are often a mystery to us—a mystery to which we must simply bow. We can pray, ask, listen, and wait on the Lord, but ultimately we must, as Bernie and I both figured out, surrender to God in trust.

Motherhood Is the School of Surrender

We are raising our families in an age where moms often hover over their children and micromanage every aspect of their lives. But do we live in an age of faith-filled moms, a world of women on their knees allowing God to transform them and their children through the persistent offering of prayer? This book is meant to encourage women to do just

that: to pick up the banner of prayer, to pray unceasingly, and to learn to surrender our children and ourselves to God.

One of the best compliments I've ever received came from my daughter Gaby, whose fourth child, Rose Grayson, was born on Holy Saturday. "I remember you were always on your knees, praying for us," she said recently while sharing about one of her little one's struggles. "I'm realizing that I've got to get more serious about praying for my children." What she doesn't know yet is just how powerful praying for her children will be and how much it will change her too.

Indeed, it is among a mother's most important labors to pray diligently for her children. And that doesn't always happen with words. Sometimes our prayers go forth through songs and dancing. Sometimes they rise up through tears and groans. But whatever form they take, the prayers of a mother's heart have to be one of the most potent forces in the universe, because they effect so much love in the world.

I think of my own mother as I write these words on the Feast of St. Jude, the day before my birthday. My mother always told me that she named me after St. Jude because she had the Asian flu when I was born, and she prayed a novena to "the patron saint of impossible causes" that God would spare my life. I firmly believe my mother's prayers not only saved my life but also ultimately led me to know, love, and serve God.

While I wandered far from God in college and temporarily lost faith in him completely after graduation, I found my way to a personal relationship with Jesus in an

evangelical Christian church at the age of twenty-three. I now understand that conversion as the day my infant Baptism at Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in New Orleans finally “took.” Five years later, Mary Immaculate grabbed hold of me and brought me back home to the church of my childhood, back to the bosom of the Catholic Church and the family table of the Eucharist. For the last twenty-seven years, she has led me along a path of ever-deepening conversion, helping me learn to say yes to God in all things—not just the things I find palatable or easy to swallow. Mary has revealed herself over time as my own heavenly Mother, a Mother who’s led me to love her Son more deeply while teaching me the virtues of docility and obedience to Christ and his Church. Further, she has cradled me tenderly and unceasingly as multiple tragedies have struck our lives—as I buried my stepson, two brothers, and husband, and then came terrifyingly close to burying my firstborn son to addiction. The Blessed Mother is the ultimate model of femininity and motherhood, and I’ve looked to her constantly over the years both as an example of godliness and as a source of powerful heavenly intercession, particularly in my endeavors as a mother.

Motherhood has been one of the most rewarding, humbling, and enlightening undertakings of my life, and, oh, how I’ve needed Mary’s help! It has made me love with reckless abandon and driven me countless times to my knees, begging for God’s grace, mercy, and intervention. And I see no end in sight. *Because* I am a mother, I am a praying mother. And I will remain a praying mother all the days of my life.

I invite you to join me now on this journey in prayer through the life and heart of Mary, the Mother of God. May we see tremendous fruit in our lives and in the lives of our children as we pray through the forthcoming chapters of this book. And may Mary, Mother of divine grace and treasure house of God's graces, pray for us.

Making Space for Love

P O N D E R

How hard is it for me to surrender my children or myself to God? How attached am I to the belief that I am in control or that I have to hold on to specific outcomes for things to be okay? What would happen if I released everything completely to God's care, including my children? Am I willing to do that now?

P R A Y

Father in heaven, I thank you for the gift of my children and for the sublime vocation of motherhood. I admit that I have often been full of fear, worrying endlessly about my children, about their lives, their futures, and their safety. Yet, Lord, you teach us that "there is no fear in love" and that "one who fears is not yet perfect in love" (1 Jn 4:18). Make your love perfect in me, Father, that I may live free of fear and full of faith and trust in you, especially regarding my children. I entrust them to you now, placing them into the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and into the safe embrace of your loving, merciful hands. Watch over them, Father. Hold them close to your heart at all times, guiding them safely to their eternal

destiny with you in heaven. I relinquish control over their lives and their futures to you, surrendering them to your holy will. Father, help me to trust that you love them more than I, and help me daily to live in that trust. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.