

## **Restorative Prayer**

### **Fr. Eric Mah**

Hi everyone, it's Father Eric. Today I'd like to talk to you about restorative prayer. But before I begin, I thought I might say a few things about myself for those of you don't really know me. So again, I'm Father Eric. I'm a priest from the Archdiocese of Toronto. But back in the day, I actually lived in Vancouver, right? So technically I was born in Maple Ridge, and eventually I went to the University of British Columbia to do my Bachelor of Arts with English literature emphasis before moving on to Dalhousie in Halifax.

So I did my law degree there, went to Toronto to work as a lawyer for a couple years before eventually entering the seminary. So I went to St. Augusta Seminary in Scarborough, Ontario. After I got ordained, my first placement was at Blessed Trinity in North York, where I was there for a couple years before going to St. Leonard's in Brampton, before moving on to Oshawa, so St. Joseph the Worker in Oshawa, before moving on to my current assignments, St. James in Colgan, Ontario, where I have two other mission churches, St. Mary's in Achill and St. Francis Xavier in Tottenham. And so, I've been a priest for about 10 years, and I'm really happy to be with you here today.

### **A Personal Retreat**

So again, the topic today is restorative prayer. And just to give you a bit of background about that, basically, when I was in my second-to-last placement, so again, St. Joseph's the Worker in Oshawa, it was my first placement as a pastor. But I was also priest chaplain of three post-secondary institutions. So Ontario Tech, Durham College, and Trent. And so it was a lot, you know, just getting used to identity issues, being a pastor for the first time, but also dealing with all those different responsibilities coming with being a priest chaplain and pastor. And I remember kind of feeling not just tired, but almost, like, close to being burnt out, you know? And I'd never really taken a personal retreat before.

But that point, I thought, you know, "Gosh, if there's ever a time to take a personal retreat, it would seem to be now." And so, I decided to go to Florida. Like, why not, right? And so, it just happens to be that the Serra Club here in the Archdiocese of Toronto, they have this really great program for docent priests from the archdiocese where you can go to the seminary in Florida, I think it's name is DePaul Seminary, in Florida to stay in a couple rooms reserved for us on the cheap, right? So I think it's like \$50-a-pop-per-night type thing.

So I went there for like, a week, and I was doing this thing where I was on retreat, I was in Florida, so beautiful weather and that sort of thing. But I found that I was still struggling to relax, and I'm sure many of you can relate to that, right? So you're in a vacation-type setting, you're on a retreat, you know, but at the same time, things aren't really coming together to kind of help you feel restored. And I got to tell you, quite honestly, the thing which really helped to put me over the top to restore me to my former self and even moved me on that in a certain sense, was this idea of restorative prayer. So not just saying prayers, but praying in such a way that was restoring my heart, and my soul, and my spirit.

## Matthew Chapter 11

And so, that's basically what this talk is supposed to be, right? So basically, the thing I found most relaxing when I was in Florida, was being by the dock, if you will, having my little pocket Bible, you know, some nice little faux leather with a, you know, a little ribbon kind of, you know, at that particular passage, which kind of strikes you at the time, and praying with this particular passage that I want to focus on for the bulk of the talk, Matthew chapter 11, right? Which is, I would say my favorite passage in the entire Bible, right?

So again, I was praying with the little pocket Bible by the dock. And usually with ribbons, right? You're supposed to kind of like move it around depending on which passage kind of floats your boat. But in this case, what was kind of interesting was that I kept this ribbon on this passage, again, Matthew chapter 11, for the entirety of the week that I was there in Florida, because it kept on feeding me. And you know, if something keeps on feeding you, like, why not just keep it going, right? So for those of you who aren't familiar with the passage, it basically goes like this. "Come to me all you are weary and find life burdensome, and I'll give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I'm meek and humble of hearts, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light,"

So first of all, this notion of coming. So the Lord invites you to come to Him whenever you feel weary and find life burdensome, right? Apparently in the Bible, there's some variation of "Do not be afraid," like, at least 365 times, So at least once for every day of the year. Which is kind of consoling, because it means the Lord wants us to come to Him whenever we're feeling, again, weary and we find life burdensome. But at the same time, it's a humbling thing because it means we're always freaking out, right? And the idea, here, that I want to convey in the early going is that we're called to get used to that, We're the ones that always need to receive, which would ordinarily be a cause for concern, except for the fact that God is real, God is our father, and He's the one who always gives. And we can rely on that, we can count on that, right? So we can come to Him all the time, And again, the idea is to make that kind of normative, right? We never graduate from being this open wound who's in need of the salvific grace of God the Father,

## The Idea of Trust

And so, the example that comes to mind, think about the Holy sacrifice of the mass, right? So different parts of the mass, right? But the thing I want to focus on is this idea of the preparation of the gifts, so the priest receives, you know, the bread and the wine and whatnot, and then combines, as you might recall, the wine and the water in preparation for, like, the Liturgy of the Eucharist. And the water, of course, represents our humanity, but the wine represents the Lord's sacred divinity. And so the idea, I mean, if you've ever seen mass being performed, right? So the priest pours a lot of wine, right, let's say an abundance of wine, in contrast to a little bit of water, let's say, like, a drop of water, right? And the idea is that that's what it looks like to be in right relationship with God.

So it goes to the idea of trust. So a lot of times, for example, when it comes to trust, people, they know they're called to trust, but at the same time, they struggle with the concept because they think, "Well, gosh, the Lord says 'You can do nothing without Me,' but I think I could do all sorts

of things without Him," right? And the idea's that, first of all, you can't do things of value, lasting value, without the Lord. But at the same time, more to the point, even though you're called to collaborate with God's grace to do something, it's always some variation of, like, "I focus on being the single drop of water and then I allow the Lord to be the great abundance of wine." Now, to kind of flesh it out, think about St. Paul, right? This whole famous thorn of flesh. Three times, he begs the Lord to take it away. Three times meaning, like, all the time in Bible speak, right? So, you know, begging Him to take away this hidden recurring pain, right? And yet the Lord says, "My grace is sufficient for you, My power is made perfect in weakness,"

Which is to say to him, like, an important prerequisite of real intimacy and closeness with God the Father is that you need to learn to be comfortable having this dangling sense of insecurity as embodied by the thorn of flesh. But, you see, hold that thought and compare that to the Blessed Virgin Mary, She rejoices at her nothingness. You see that, for example, in the visitation when she encounters her cousin Elizabeth, and she kind of proclaims that great hymn of praise, the Magnificat, "My soul magnifies the Lord," And the idea is that, okay, I rejoice my nothingness because through that, the Lord, who is everything, His glory is magnified through me, And so, again, in contrast to St. Paul, Mary rejoices in her nothingness because in that, God is great. She's comfortable with being a single drop of water to allow the Lord to be the great abundance of wine.

## **The Nature of the Yoke**

So all that is kind of conveyed in this notion of coming to the Lord whenever we feel weary and find life burdensome. Okay, now, obviously the next thing which kind of comes to mind in terms of the actual passage is this notion of the yoke. And with this we have to kind of contemplate the nature of a yoke, right? So a yoke is basically this idea of a wooden beam, kind of borne by two or more animals, right? So think about, you know, oxen plowing a field, or think about, you know, Santa's reindeer, right? And so the idea is that it's meant to be shared, right? So the idea is that a lot of times, we go on out by ourselves without realizing we're meant to kind of share the burden with the Lord.

And going back to the other point, to kind of allow the Lord to take the majority of the burden, right? So illustrate the point, think about that really famous story, the multiplication of the loaves and the fish, right? And so you might recall there's these 5,000 people who kind of, you know, leave everything to follow the Lord, to linger in His presence, to listen to His word. And now they're hungry, right? And so, the disciples, you know, mindful of their great need, they implore the Lord to send them away quietly, if you will. But at the same time, the Lord kind of responds by saying, "Well, you give them something to eat," right? And of course, all they have are five loaves and two fish, right? And of course, they give that to the Lord. He blesses it, He breaks it, and uses that kind of meager offering to feed the 5,000.

Now, a couple things with that, right? So the idea is that certainly, in response to the problems of this world, we're called to give it our all, right? So some variation of five loaves and two fish. But regardless of who we are, regardless of the sum of our gifts and talents and various resources, personally speaking or collectively, well, all we have are, again, five loaves and two fish. It's not enough to meet the task at hand to deal with the problems of life. And so, we need to

rely on the Lord, right? But the idea is that we have to remember that we're never called to feed the 5,000. We're never called to take on the entirety of a complex problem. We're always called to focus on, you know, providing some variation of five loaves and the two fish, and to allow the Lord to solve the problem, to allow the Lord to feed the 5,000, right? It's a variation of taking on His yoke. It's a shared yoke, but the Lord takes on the bulk of the load. That's what it means. That's what it looks like to, again, to be in right relationship with God.

## **Taking on the Lord's Yoke**

The other aspect of the yoke is to take on the Lord's yoke as opposed to some competing yoke proposed to you by the world, right? And so, a couple of examples here kind of come to mind. So think about the story of Martha and Mary, right? So as you know, you know, Jesus loves everybody, but there's certain people He hangs out with on His days off, right? And so, He hangs out with these two sisters, Martha, Mary, and also their brother Lazarus. And so anyways, the Gospel story in question involves, you know, Jesus coming over to Martha and Mary's place. Mary is sitting at his feet listening to his every word and Martha's in the kitchen preparing lunch, or dinner, or whatever, for the party. And at a certain point, Martha gets really upset, right? So she chastises the Lord, urging Him, imploring Him to tell her sister to help her in the kitchen, right? But of course, what does the Lord say, right? So what he says is, "Martha, Martha, you were worried and anxious about many things," right? "Mary has chosen the better part, which shall not be taken away from her," right?

Okay, now, a lot of times, people look at that story and they say, "Well, the takeaway message is, you know, Martha represents the active life. Mary represents the contemplative life. So simple takeaway message, contemporary life good and active life bad," right? But you got to remember that, like, Martha's a saint too, along with Mary. And so, the idea here is it's not so much that the Lord's criticizing the active life. He's criticizing something about Martha's spirituality in this moment, right? And so, what's the particular thing of concern? Again, "You are worried and anxious about many things." "You are worried and anxious about many things." And so, what's implied there is that, "You are taking on some sort of yoke, which is not the yoke from Me." Because again, "Only My yoke was easy, only My burden is light," right? And so, it's one thing to kind of do work, we're called to do work, right? Adam was even invited to name the animals in the book of Genesis before the Fall, right? So work is meant to be this, this beautiful collaboration with the work of the creator God.

At the same time, if you find that you're becoming worried and anxious about many things in the midst of doing your work, probably again, you're taking on a yoke which the Lord doesn't want you to take. So that's kind of the first example to illustrate that point. The corresponding example is from my internship year.

## **Called to Focus on the Lord**

So as you probably know, when you're in the seminary, there's this year where you're put in a parish to kind of learn what it's like to be, you know, a priest without actually being a priest, right? So journeying with people in the corners of parish life. And I remember, kind of partway through my internship year, talking to my leadership pastor about difficult people in the parish,

right? And so, in my mind I was thinking, you know, "Gosh, we're all called to be like St. Paul, you know, being all things to all men," right? And so, I was thinking not simply about people who were docile in the face of the Gospel, but also people who I deemed to be kind of difficult, right? Stubborn, obstinate, if you will. So I remember kind of talking to my internship pastor about these people and kind of saying to him some variation of like, you know, "What do you think about these people," right? Not so much in terms of like, "Do you think they're difficult?" because we both knew that they were. But the idea of like, you know, "What do you think we can do to kind of, you know, move them along," if you will, right?

And I remember his response was kind of shocking, but looking back on it, really wise, right? And so, basically what he said was that, "Eric, I don't think about these people at all. "I don't think about these people at all." And I was obviously, like, really shocked. But then he went on to kind of expound upon that and he said, "Well, look, every day, Eric, the Lord calls me to kind of focus on the few things He wants me to do carefully and well, right? And so, in order for me to even recognize what these things are, never mind actually do these things carefully and well, I need to learn to say no not just to overtly evil things, but, you know, lesser goods, right? To again, focus on the few things the Lord wants me to do carefully and well." And what he was suggesting was that we're all called to do that, right? To focus, again, on a few things the Lord calls us to do carefully and well, mindful that in that we find God's grace, His presence, His salvation, not just for us but for the entire world.

## **Understanding Meekness**

Okay, so that's the idea of the yoke. Now, to go on with regards to the passage, the Lord talks about meekness. "Learn from me, for I am meek," right? So meekness is not about being shy, it's not about social dexterity, right? So it's more about focus, it's more about integrity. So Father John Riccardo talks about this, right? And so, basically what he says is that when it comes to meekness, think about a wild horse, right? So you buy a wild horse, right, if you're into horses. And before the horse is meeked, the horse is kicking up a wild storm or kicking up dust, probably kicking you in the face, all these terrible things, right? And so, he needs to be meeked. And once he's meeked, once he's tamed, if you will, he retains, in the words of Father John, all his strength, all his power, all his passion, but now it's focused. Now it's integrity, now he can direct these things towards being useful, right?

And it's the same thing with us, right? So you think about, for example, St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Augustine. Pre-conversion, what were they like? They were all over the place. They were like that horse kicking up a storm, right? And so, Peter cutting off that servant's ear, St. Paul killing Christians across the countryside, St. Augustine involved in fornication, right? And yet, here's the thing, post-conversion, what were they like, right? They had all their strength; again, all their power; all their passion. But now everything was focused to serve God's salvific designs. So that's what it means to be meek, to be focused, right?

To give you a contemporary example, I remember, back in the day, talking to a priest friend of mine who heard my confession. And I remember, in the course of giving advice in the consecrated sacrament, what he said was that, you know, "Look, in the early going of the spiritual life, it seems like the dilemma is like, you know, 'Should I choose to do the good or

should I choose to pursue the evil,' right? And you hum and haw for a bit, you think, 'Oh, okay, gosh, I guess I should pursue the good,' right? Good-for-you-type thing." But then he said, like, "In reality what it is, you need to kind of progress to learn to be even more focused than that, right?" So it's not so much good versus evil. It's like, greater good versus lesser good, right? Greater good versus perfect good, right? And so, the whole idea is that, again, you only have time and energy to focus on the few things the Lord wants you to do carefully and well, to focus on the greater good, if not the perfect good, right?

I think it was Bishop Fulton Sheen who talked about this, right? Where he said, basically, when you think of a container, right, you want to kind of fill the container so full of salt there's no room for the pepper, right? And I just love that expression, right? Because it reminds us that the spiritual life is not about avoiding spiritual landmines. Like, you know, "Don't do this, don't do that. Don't commit this sin, don't, you know, whatever." And therefore it adds up to you being good. Like, there's something you got to do instead, right? So there's a positive obligation. And the idea is that, you know, rather than simply avoid evil, I need to be so caught up in God's designs for myself and for the world that, again, I have no time for the lesser good. Because basically, I've been meeked, if you will.

## **Notion of Humility**

Okay, but that brings us, of course, to the notion of humility, right? So "Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart," right? Now, Bishop Robert Barron talks about this. You know, and so he says with humility, again, it has nothing to do with being shy, right? So a lot of times people think that someone who is loud-mouthed is, prideful. Whereas someone who's a cowering, shy wallflower kind of sitting in the corner is humble, right? But again, these things have nothing to do with social dexterity. And so, the whole idea is that if you're prideful, again, in the words of bishop Robert Barron, "You're caught up in the narrow space of the ego." Whereas if you're humble, you have the wherewithal to get lost in the great rhythm and beauty of life.

And so, for example, imagine you're an elite athlete. And so, for example, imagine you're playing in the NBA, you're a professional basketball player, you're at the peak of your powers. And you're playing in this high-end playoff game. What're you thinking as you're making a shot? You're probably not thinking, "Boy, I hope I don't miss this." But you're also probably not thinking, "Boy, I'm totally going to make this shot because I'm awesome." If you're actually in the game, you're probably not thinking at all. You're just lost, again, in the great rhythm and beauty of the game. I'll give you another example, which is kind of closer to my own life, right? And so, back in the day, when I was in the seminary, I was on the social committee, right? So we would organize parties for the seminary community.

And one particular party that we organized was called the Art House Social, right? And so, all the seminarians had in their rooms different variations of devotional art, right? So art which moved them personally and led them close to Christ, whether we're talking about, like, icons, pictures, statues, or whatever. And so what we did, we invited our fellow seminarians to donate, for a period of time, their different works of art to kind of, you know, have on display in the hall of the seminary community so people could walk around and see these different forms of arts

displayed in sort of an art-gallery museum format and kind of learn more about Christian art and more about the people who kind of had these things in their rooms. Anyways, one of the seminarians wasn't just an artist himself, but also a great photographer. And he took a lot of really great photos of things in and around the seminary, including our seminary chapel, right? And so, as you might imagine, like, you know, seminarians, they'll pray in this chapel, you know, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, right?

So we knew this chapel intimately. Or so we thought, right? And so this guy, he took this beautiful photo of this chapel. And it was just like, you know, right angle, like, you know, kind of from the bottom shooting up to the top, if you will, right time of day, you know. So the sun was shining through these luminous stained-glass windows and it was just a perfect shot. And so, this guy had this photo, along with his other photos, displayed at this art gallery social. No word of a lie, a lot of people were walking by this particular photo of the chapel and they would say out loud, like, "Gosh, you know, that that's a beautiful chapel. Where is that?" And it's like, it's our chapel, right? But again, a lot of guys hadn't noticed it because, you know, arguably they were caught up in the narrow space of the ego. Like, they were guilty of pride. Whereas what they had to do was learn to cultivate a deep sense of humility, getting lost in the great rhythm and beauty of life, being fully present to life where alone, you meet God and a salvific grace. Okay, now obviously, there's kind of a lot going on here, but I want to end, now, with this one particular story which helps to kind of pull all these things together, right? So this's from the Gospel of Matthew chapter eight.

## **Jesus with the Disciples and the Storm**

The story of Jesus with the disciples in the midst of the storm, right? So there's a couple storm stories in the Gospel, but this's the one where Jesus's asleep in the boat and the disciples' freaking out and they wake Him up, right? And here's the thing, like, while the storm's still going on, He chastises them, right? So, you know, "Why are you worried," basically, "Ye of little faith," right? Again, while the storm is still going on. You know, obviously He calms the storm immediately after this harsh rebuke. But the point is that this idea of rebuking them while the storm is still going on reminds us that the peace that Christ offers us, the peace beyond all understanding, is meant to be the peace which persists in the midst of difficult circumstances, in the midst of storms, right? And that's really important for us to remember, because a lot of times we tell ourselves, "Well gosh," you know, "the reason why I don't have peace is because of these difficult circumstances. So just like, wait till the weekend, wait till I go to Florida" or whatever, right? But you got to realize that in the vast majority of cases, it has to do with you not being in the right relationship with God, right?

Which's why again, this passage from the Gospel of Matthew chapter 11 is really instructive and really important, right? Because what it tells us is that the peace of Christ is offered to us right now. But at the same time, it's both a gift and a task. It's this gratuitous gift offered to us by the Lord because He's generous, and He's loving, and He's all these things. But at the same time, not unlike a gift, it needs to be kind of unwrapped, right?

## Pray More Lenten Retreat 2023 - Transcript

So there's a task we need to undertake to kind of receive the gift, right? And so obviously again, you know, the Gospel spells out what those things are, right? So first of all, have to have the boldness to come to Him over and over again whenever we're starting to feel weary, and whenever we find life even slightly burdensome. And on top of that, to imitate the Lord's meekness, to imitate His humility. And on top of that, to focus on receiving the Lord's yoke, to share the yoke with the Lord, to allow Him to carry the bulk of the burden, and to make sure we're taking on only His yoke as opposed to a competing yoke, mindful of the fact that, again, only the Lord's yoke is easy and only His burden is light.