

Mercy Is The True Sacrifice Offered On The Altar

by Fr. Raymond-Marie Bryce, OP

“Go and learn the meaning of the words, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ I did not come to call the righteous but sinners.” (Mt 9:13)

All of our offerings, all of our worship is a vehicle for Christ to fill us with His grace. He wants to transform us and to replace our stony hearts with hearts alike to his own Sacred Heart. When he feeds us with his Body and Blood in the Eucharist, his aim is none other than to make us become what we eat. When Christ commanded us to “do this in memory of me” there are multiple layers of intent at play. First, at a most basic level, we remember his ultimate sacrifice to save us from our sins. Second, the institution of the Eucharist which we recently celebrated on Holy Thursday became the central means by which Christ would nourish us with the grace merited by his Passion. However, our nourishment was not an end in itself but a means—a means to infuse us with invisible divine realities even more real and enduring than visible, tangible, and passing species; a means to strengthen us *for* our mission which he calls us to share in as members of his mystical body. The third level of meaning of “do this in memory of me” is the *imitatio Christi*. The Eucharist is the perpetuation of Christ’s merciful self-gift on the cross. It is this mercy which he asks us, and for which he strengthens us, to extend throughout space and time. Mercy then, too, is the *this* in the command “do *this* in memory of me.”

As baptized members of the mystical body, we appropriate the threefold character of Christ as priest, prophet, and king. (Cf. Rite of Baptism) Dominican scholar Fr. Jean-Pierre Torrell emphasizes the role of corporal works of mercy in the exercise of our membership in the royal priesthood of the baptized. The invisible nature of our sacrifice ought not be dismissed as being less real than the elements brought forward on the physical altar in the parish but as the very sacrifices which we unite to the perfect sacrifice of Jesus on the altar. St. Polycarp, Tertullian, and the witness of the Didascalia each point to the spiritual altar of those to whom we extend mercy.

“...Be constant therefore in the ministry of the altar of Christ—we mean the widow and the orphans—so that with all care and with all diligence you make it your endeavor to search out the things that are given...we say again—of the altar. For when widows are nourished from (the fruits of) righteous labor, they offer a holy and acceptable ministry before Almighty God through His beloved Son and His holy Spirit.” (Didascalia 18, quoted in Torrell, *A Priestly People*, Paulist Press 2013, p.121)

Polycarp exhorts us to corporal works of mercy, “...knowing that they [widows] are the altar of God, that He clearly perceives all things, and that nothing is hid from Him, neither reasonings, nor reflections, nor any one of the secret things of the heart.” (Polycarp, *Epistle to the Philippians*, at www.newadvent.com) “The title is further extended to the orphans, to the elderly, to the sick, to those raising children—all of whom must be acknowledged as the altar of God. If they have received gifts, it is not without reciprocity, for they pray assiduously for those who give to them, paying them back by prayer.” (Torrell, 120)

As the Psalmist says, “My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit; a contrite, humbled heart, O God, you will not scorn.” (Ps 51:18-19) It is in full contrition that we recognize that Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross and his promise of our own Resurrection are purely benevolent, unmerited, merciful gifts. Thus let us with joy offer our lives as instruments of the Divine Mercy bringing true sacrifices to His altar.

“This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; Sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own. Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your wound shall quickly be healed.” (Is 58:6-8)