

Christ's Perfect Love for us: His Sacrifice on the Cross

Having spoken about the importance of charity and how it is the very essence of our Christian life, we must remember that this is not some abstract or ethereal concept. Our Christian charity must be lived out. How? In concrete acts of charity—we have to “walk the walk.” And the supreme expression of charity is found in self-sacrifice: *Greater love than this no man has, than to lay down his life for his friend.*

St. Thomas Aquinas teaches us that true charity wills the good of the other. When we love someone, we want them to have what is good; and so charity, by its very nature, includes the notion of gift. And the greatest gift we can give is ourselves. Hence charity always requires some amount of self-sacrifice, some amount of giving of oneself. To love is to give another what is good, especially oneself. *Greater love than this no man has, than to lay down his life for his friend.*

Sacrifice, in the widest sense of the term, means laying aside some good of our own and dedicating it to some one or some particular cause. The musician lays aside hours of his day in order to practice his instrument; the athlete lays aside his personal comfort, enduring long workouts for the good of the team; the soldier sacrifices his life for the good of his country. And so it is with true charity: any act of charity requires that we set aside some good for the one we love. It might be something very simple, like giving a beggar a few dollars for some food, or even simply greeting someone as they walk by, in which case we give our attention to that person. Whatever the case may be, true charity seems to require self-sacrifice; and in turn, sacrifice in the truest sense—that is not simply setting aside a good for anything whatsoever, but setting it aside for God—requires charity.

St. Paul once said, *Even if I hand over my body to be burned, but have not charity, it profits me nothing* [1 Cor 13:3]. Charity and sacrifice. They are closely united. Where you find one, you find the other. Where one is lacking, so is the other. This is something today's world does not seem to

understand, or at least does not want to acknowledge. Sacrifice without charity is not sacrifice, but lunacy—the suicide bomber provides the perfect example of this. Charity without sacrifice is not charity. At best it's infatuation; at worst, lust. Millions of divorces give ample testimony to this. So, for true charity do not look to the world, rather look to Christ on the Cross: the perfect example of true charity and real sacrifice.

Like the crossbeams of the crucifix, charity and sacrifice meet in our Lord's Sacred Heart. *Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends [Jn 15:13]. By this we know the love of God, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren [1 Jn 3:16].* This is why the enemies of all that is good hate the cross so much and try to take it down from our schools and public monuments, and go to all lengths to trample it down: because it reminds them with the most remarkable eloquence what true love is all about; and in so doing it convicts them of all their false loves and make-believe sacrifices.

Now, as we said, Christ gives us the perfect example of love and self-sacrifice. It was His love and self-sacrifice that redeemed us. *This is He that came by water and blood, Jesus Christ.* One can say that these words of St. John in a certain sense sum-up for us our Lord's life of love and sacrifice. Charity and sacrifice, as lived out by Christ is what we call the Pascal Mystery: His Death and Resurrection, the means He used to redeem us from sin; the greatest expression of His love for us. Water and blood, as we know, flowed forth from our Lord's side when it was pierced with a lance. You might say the water and blood was the last statement made by our Lord from the Cross.

The water represents Baptism, that sacrament by which we are washed clean of the stain of original sin and begin our new life in Christ, a sacrament necessary for salvation and the gateway to all the other sacraments; Baptism is the first moment of God's mercy in our life; the first concrete expression of His love for us during our earthly lives. The blood represents the price paid by Christ

for our redemption, without which the baptismal water would have no cleansing power, and without which there would be no mercy. Water and blood: God's love and mercy and His great sacrifice for us, which was the price of that mercy. The two are inseparable. Where you find one you also find the other. *Without the shedding of blood*, says the Letter to the Hebrews, *there is no remission* [of sin]. *By His wounds you were healed*, said St. Peter. Love and sacrifice; water and blood.

It is not for no reason that Thomas the Apostle asked to see and to touch Christ's wounds before he would believe that it was in fact Christ Who had visited the disciples. Thomas knew that anyone claiming to be the Savior would be bearing in His body those five marks of mercy. Anything else would be a fraud, a false-Christ. In fact, when our Lord appeared to the disciples the first time in the upper room, St. John tells us that *He showed them His hands and His side*. The five wounds of Christ act as a sort of divine passport, showing that this is the true Merciful One, the Redeemer of the human race. Christ can promise the waters of mercy—the forgiveness of sins, His love—because He purchased them with His own blood, His sacrifice on the Cross. Christ even still bears His five wounds in heaven; but those wounds are no longer causes of sorrow, they are reasons to rejoice, badges of victory; they no longer flow with human blood...instead they gush with the torrents of divine mercy! Where there is His sacrifice there also is His love for us. If this is true of Christ the Head, it is no less true for the Church His Mystical Body and we her individual members. The water must always be purchased with blood; mercy with wounds; love and sacrifice.

At the moment of our Baptism, when we receive God's mercy for the very first time—at that moment we not only become recipients of redemption, but sharers in the work of redemption as well. From that moment on our wounds also have a certain redemptive power, that is, if we unite them to Christ's, if we receive them with loving patience and resignation to His holy will. Our Lord loves us so much that He was not content in simply saving us; He wants us to help Him save others

as well. He wants all of us to partake in His mercy and then turn and communicate that same mercy to others. He shows us His wounds, and then asks us to share in them also. *I now rejoice in my sufferings*, said St. Paul, *and I fill up in my body those things that are lacking in the sufferings of Christ for His body the Church*. Just imagine how many souls we can help save, if we unite every one of our tiny little wounds to the five wounds of our Blessed Lord!

Did you ever stop and think how utterly insane it must have seemed to the natives of North America when Bl. Junipero Serra and the other Catholic missionaries who came over to convert them, took out a crucifix and said, “This is our God”? You can almost imagine their reaction: “Your God? You must mean the enemy of your God, right? The one your God conquered. This statue you show us is of a man who just lost a battle. He is obviously no great warrior. He is obviously a weak one, the one over whom your God was victorious.”

--“No, no. This, this is our God, the man on the Cross. He allowed this to happen to Himself. He wanted to do this for us because He loves us.”

--“He became a victim for you because He loves you?”

The wisdom of God and its apparent absurdity, its foolishness in the eyes of men, is presented most clearly in the Cross. It is by the Cross that Christ conquered sin; it is by the Cross that Christ showed His love for the Father and for us; and it is by carrying our own cross that we show our love for Christ and share in His plan of redemption.

Suffering, weariness, tiredness, are all effects of sin, the sin of our first parents. The existence of such daily crosses cannot be denied by even an atheist; but something an unbeliever does not see is that such hardships can become not only light and easy, but even sweet and causes of great joy. How? By uniting them to the Cross of Christ, that is, by accepting them with humility and complete resignation, by seeing in them your key to heaven and a chance to glorify God. And this is what our Blessed Lord means when He tells us that, if you are overburdened, to take His

yoke upon you, and you will find rest—rest even in the midst of the very trials that weigh you down. Or as He Himself once told Bl. Bronislava, a Norbertine nun: *My cross is your cross, but My glory shall be your glory.*

The cross will be too much to bear only for those who seek to shake it off and even trample it down. These it will bother, then cut into, and someday crush. But those who embrace it will soon find that the more tightly one holds it, the lighter it becomes. St. Francis De Sales once said the following: *The everlasting God has in His wisdom foreseen from all eternity the cross that He now presents to you as a gift from His inmost Heart. This cross He now sends you He has considered with His all-knowing eyes, understood with His divine mind, tested with His wise justice, warmed with His loving arms, to see that it be not one inch too large and not one ounce too heavy for you. He has blessed it with His Holy Name, anointed it with His consolation, taken one last glance at you and your courage, and then sent it to you from heaven, a special greeting from God to you, an alms of the all-merciful love of God.* Always hold fast to the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. See in it your key to salvation. Love His Cross and never let go of it; and by means of it He will draw you to Himself. Bl. James Kern once said, *God always needs people, some for work and others for suffering...And if I am allowed to be even just a little wheel in God's plan for the world, then I shall be exceedingly joyful.*

I leave you with one beautiful example of love and sacrifice, the fruits of which we shall see only in heaven. It happened a few years ago now, in Iraq, when a young priest, Fr. Ragheed Ganni, decided not to flee his home town of Mosul, but to stay and bear witness to the Prince of Peace, even though Mosul is one of the most dangerous places in that country. Well, after coming back from Mass on Pentecost Sunday, Fr. Ragheed and his three subdeacons were gunned down by Islamic militants. He knew that what his country of lost sheep needed was the presence of the Good Shepherd, so he stayed *usque ad mortem*, even until death. The Church now has four new martyrs,

and the many lost sheep who will be converted from this sacrifice will only be known in heaven.

And one of the last things that good priest told his parishioners was this: *Christ challenges evil with His infinite love, and through the Eucharist He gives back to us the life that the terrorists seek to take away...We will not stop celebrating the Mass.* He knew that there is no greater act of love and sacrifice for poor sinners than the Holy Mass, the sacrifice of Calvary. So he offered the Holy Mass for them, Christ's self-sacrifice, and then imitated what he offered. May we do the same.