

“Sacrificial Love, the Secure Foundation of the Christian Life”
Homily for Chrism Mass
April 11, 2019

Introduction

A wise Biblical scholar once said: “The only secure foundation for a kingdom is sacrificial love.” We hear a lot about “kingdom building” these days, and as long as we keep that in the abstract, it stays safe and comfortable for us. But if we want to bring that down into the concrete, where it really makes a difference, we have to live it out in the specific communities of our day-to-day life, each according to his or her own vocation in life: family, parish, religious community, school, and so forth. This is where sacrificial love ceases to be a pious platitude, and takes on flesh – the only way for a community to thrive.

Jesus as Model of Sacrificial Love

Our Lord, of course, is our model and prototype of sacrificial love. Exactly one week from now, we will begin the celebration of the Easter Triduum with the Holy Thursday liturgy: the Mass of the Lord’s Supper, commemorating him instituting the Eucharist at the Last Supper and famously lowering himself, the master, to wash the feet of his disciples. That gesture poignantly expresses the meaning of his entire life on this earth, and especially the end of his life on this earth which he would offer on the Cross the next day.

In our second reading, we heard from the Book of Revelation: “Jesus Christ, ... the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth.” That is, by the power of his Resurrection he has defeated the one who would seek to usurp God’s authority to be the ruler of this world. We see here a connection with his temptation in the desert, for this is exactly what the devil promised him: “... the devil took him up to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence, and he said to him, ‘All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me’” (Mt 4:8-9). Instead, Jesus wins this for himself by his sacrificial love – the suffering of the Cross and the power of the Resurrection.

It was not by compromise with evil, but by the unswerving loyalty and the unfailing love with which he accepted the Cross, that Jesus entered into his universal lordship. The devil could never give him this in the first place, for his kingdom is built on selfishness, pride and sin – there is no room for love there. It is from the sacrificial love of Jesus, on the contrary, that was born the community that is his bride, the Church.

The Priest’s Vocation to Sacrificial Love

It is because of the Chrism Mass’ association with Holy Thursday that, in addition to it having the purpose of the bishop blessing the Oils of Catechumens and the Sick and consecrating the Chrism, it also carries with it the theme of the renewal of priestly promises. The very purpose of the ministerial Priesthood is to prepare God’s people to worthily receive the most holy Eucharist and to celebrate the sacrament for them. At his ordination the priest has his hands anointed with Chrism for offering the sacrifice of the Eucharist. This anointing of the priest, then, identifies him with Christ, God’s anointed one, as we hear about in the Gospel reading for this Chrism Mass. There Jesus of Nazareth inaugurates his public ministry by reading in the synagogue the prophecy from Isaiah which he himself fulfills: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon

me, because he has anointed me” – anointed to usher in an era of Good News: he has opened up for us the path to eternal salvation.

But Jesus, the anointed one, needs his human agents in this world to continue his mission of proclaiming the Good News through word and sacrament. Thus, the ministerial Priesthood. Through all of the vicissitudes of history, all of the changes in human society over these last 2,000 years of Christian history, the Priesthood has remained a constant. And this, even with radically different social environments in which it is lived out. Certainly our own time presents its own unique challenges for priestly ministry, arising not only from the undermining of basic principles of faith and the Church’s teaching on many points of doctrine, but now of even the most basic principles of the natural law. If we add to that the individualistic culture in which we are living, exacerbated by digital technology, we can readily admit that, while every age presents its challenges to evangelization, in our own time the Church is facing even deeper challenges that had not even been conceivable before.

It certainly becomes easy to get discouraged. The youthful zeal of the priest’s years in the seminary can begin to wane over time. He arrives at his ordination full of fervor to go out and convert the world. But then, after awhile, it becomes harder than he thought – the hidden, unpleasant revelations of reality that he didn’t know about or didn’t think about seriously enough. To his surprise he finds that people use him; not all are full of good will. And then, too, he meets up with his own shortcomings, failures, and human weaknesses. He makes great sacrifices but begins to question the worth of it all – it seems that it is all for naught.

When the priest allows this kind of discouragement to set in, bad habits begin to take over and good habits become corrupted; at worst, vice begins to replace virtue – starting with laziness, then moving to indifference and then to despair and then to weakening of faith. And then, imperceptibly, without even realizing it has happened, the priest leaves his vocation. No, I do not mean that he returns to the lay state; rather, his Priesthood becomes a job. He does what he needs to do to get the job done, but lives for himself, not his people. His Priesthood is no longer a vocation, the means by which God perfects him into being the person God created him to be; he is no longer a shepherd responding to God’s call in his life. These struggles to some degree are inescapable; all priests have to deal with them at some time or another, to a greater or lesser degree.

Back to Basics

However, while the circumstances under which the priest labors will always be in flux, there is one constant through it all: the love of God, which does not change. Which means that, for the priest, the starting point must always be imitation of the sacrificial love of Jesus himself. At one of his daily Mass homilies about a year ago, Pope Francis spoke about these dangers and pitfalls, and the invariable antidote to them. In preaching on the scene of Peter’s call after the miraculous catch at the end of St. John’s Gospel, Pope Francis calls Jesus’ command to Peter – “Love me, care (for others) and prepare yourself” – the “road map of a pastor, the compass” that must guide his ministry and life’s journey. He says that this kind of sacrificial love is the essential rule or “grammar” for being “true disciples of the son of God.” According to the Holy Father, this means that all those who embrace the Lord are destined to carry the cross, to leave what they have behind. He spoke to the priests that day in no uncertain terms: “Prepare yourself for ordeals, prepare yourself to leave everything Prepare yourself for this annihilation in life. They will lead you along the path of humiliation, perhaps along the path of martyrdom.” Or, he says, the same people who had once showered them with praise will bad-mouth them.

The solution he proposes is love. This is the first command of Jesus to Peter – as he puts it: “Love me more than the others, love me as you can, but love me.” And this, I might add, is something Jesus can command to all of us because he first loved us. And, again, the love of God doesn’t change. The love of God must be the fuel that keeps the priest on the path of his vocation, so that he will be well-suited to the end for which God called him in this extraordinary vocation: the salvation of souls.

This means that he must keep his priorities in place: prayer, penitential practices, devotion to ministry, and so forth. Only in keeping to these basics and observing these priorities can he be brought back to that original fervor. In our hyper-secularized society, this is the only way the priest can dispose himself to allow God to renew him in the awesome gift that God gave him at his ordination.

Priestly People

This, really, is the story of every vocation, whether that sacrificial love is lived out for kingdom building in a community that is a parish, a religious family of those in consecrated life, a natural family, or any other kind of a faith community. This is why all of the faithful receive an anointing with Chrism: the anointing in the sacrament of Confirmation.

Yes, infants who are baptized are anointed with Chrism on the crown of their head, but this is really an anticipation of the anointing they will receive in Confirmation, an anointing placed on their forehead. This signifies that Confirmation is the sacrament of our common Christian vocation: to go forth and proclaim the Good News by the witness of our holiness of life – a witness only made possible by sacrificial love. This is accomplished first and foremost by each one living their personal vocation faithfully and well.

Conclusion

The prayer of consecration of the Chrism asks God “to sanctify with [His] blessing this oil in its richness, and to pour into it the strength of the Holy Spirit,” so that those “anointed with royal, priestly, and prophetic dignity [may] be clothed with the garment of an incorruptible gift” – that is, the holiness of eternal life.

Sacrificial love is sanctifying love, and it is our sanctification – our holiness – that brings us to the perfection of happiness that God wants for us. May we live faithfully and well this sacred calling, for the sake of laying a secure foundation for God’s Kingdom in this world, and of enjoying eternal life in that Kingdom in the world yet to come.