

“All In”—def.: fully committed to, or fully involved in, something; in poker, to bet everything on a hand.

What are we truly committed to these days—long term, as in “never-ending” commitment. There are so many things to choose...so many distractions. We jump from job to job, town to town, spouse to spouse, very often from church to church—and many even from denomination to denomination or religion to religion. “Commitment” nowadays often extends hardly more than to watching every episode of a favorite Netflix series.

So much more impressive, then, becomes the Old Testament recounting of Abraham’s averted sacrifice of his son Isaac—a reading from Genesis 22 in the Catholic Mass this weekend (Feb. 28). Prior to the episode, Abraham had been obedient to the instruction of God through many trials and adventures, but now God subjects him to the ultimate test: to sacrifice his only son he had from his wife Sarah (her name translates as “princess,” for all you Sarahs out there!). We read: “Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love...you shall offer him up as a holocaust on a height that I will point out to you.”

(As an aside, Abraham also had another son Ishmael, from Hagar. Islam sees Ishmael as a prophet and ancestor of Muhammad, while Jews and Christians trace their religious lineage through Isaac—the Bible and the Qur’an having differing recollections of events, of course.)

Now, in our day we are aghast at the mere suggestion of such a sacrifice, and might think: “How horrible! How could God ask such a thing?!” But in this much earlier time, human sacrifice to divinities was not uncommon. Of course, God abhors human sacrifice, and so at the last moment His angel stays Abraham’s hand. Yet it is Abraham’s willingness to give all for God—total faith, total obedience, total devotion—that redounds to Abraham’s everlasting glory.

Abraham is thus called “our father in faith”—the very seed from which sprang all monotheism—for Jews, Christians and Muslims—a status which was, by the way, prophesied thousands of years ago when Genesis was written, recounting that God told him: “I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.” (Genesis 17:6) Considering that the three “Abrahamic” faiths—Jews and Christians through Isaac, and the Muslims from Ismael—compose several billion persons and span the globe—that prophecy should make even the most cynical naysayer pause.

Now, we Christians view this halted-sacrifice episode partially as God “setting up” the event, so to speak, as a contrast for the future ... to demonstrate His own great love for Mankind, for Isaac would be a foreshadowing of Jesus Himself.

God tells Abraham to offer Isaac as a holocaust as a proof of devotion, and yet stops Abraham at the last moment ... Isaac even having carried the wood upon which he was to be sacrificed up the hill, as thousands of years later Jesus would carry the cross of His own sacrifice up Calvary. God then provides Abraham with a ram in place of Isaac, but Jesus IS the ram—the “lamb of God”—the sacrifice for sin of the whole world.

And so ... though God the Father spares Isaac, He does not even withhold His own Son upon a cross, purely out of love for us and out of His desire for our salvation and eternal life with Him, so great is His love for us. As we Catholics hear at the Easter Vigil: “O love, O charity beyond all telling, to ransom a slave, you gave away your Son...” And at Mass we also heard this weekend St. Paul: “He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him?” For, as St. John so famously assures us: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

And so ... this path of complete commitment is that upon which the dedicated Christian hopes to be able to commit himself through life—to be “all in” for God, remembering the promised salvation for those faithful to God, giving him courage, strength and motivation in the trials and tribulations which inevitably come to every life. For Christ is our hope. He is why martyrs go to their deaths singing, why nuns, monks and missionaries give their entire lives to service of God, and why the faithful for 2000 years have striven to live ever more perfectly those two great commandments of loving God and loving neighbor ... to try to be “all in”—often failing, but ever striving. Because, whatever the trials of this life, the faithful Christian sees beyond this life, like the sailor determinedly battling stormy seas to reach the joy of his home.

In Jesus, God fully revealed the totality of love He has for us ... His desire for a deep—even individual—intimate and personal relationship with each of us. And so, we when feel weighed down with the burdens of life, let us remember Jesus’ assurance to His disciples: “Rise, and have no fear.” (Matthew 17:7) ...we believing, as St. Paul writes: “...neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:37-39)

No ... nothing, and no one, but ourselves can separate us from God. We need only heed the Father’s command at the Transfiguration: “This is my beloved Son; listen to Him.” ... for “He guides me along the right path...Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me...” (Psalm 23)

Jesus gave all—was “all in” for us; can we not be “all in” for Him? And, in doing so, find peace in our hearts now, and one day be with Him in joyful eternity.