

Fr. Curtis Miller August 29-30, 2020 Homily for the 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

In the final year of his life, the poet Robert Frost was interviewed in his home in Ripton, Vermont, for a documentary. The conversation was far-ranging, from his poetry to his philosophy of life. At one point, he began to muse about a Biblical phrase, “May my gift, my sacrifice be acceptable in Thy sight.” Frost reflected that all the work and sacrifices of our lives have to be offered up to something higher than our own egos, or the passing whims of the crowd. We have to offer them up to God. And with some fear and trembling, we must pray that what we offer to God will be acceptable, will be worthy of Him. Frost continued, saying, “No matter what you do, your work, your poetry, your life, [whether you] succeed or fail,” we pray that all of it “may be an acceptable sacrifice on that altar.”

We probably recognize this phrase from the prayer in the middle of Mass, just after we present the bread and wine to God on the altar, “Pray brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the Almighty Father.” In that prayer, we are offering God the sacrifice of the bread and the wine, but also all of the sacrifices that we’ve lived out in that day or week. What we do throughout the week is not separate from what we do here in church; it is the very sacrifice that we offer here to God, the offering of our very lives.

Sacrifice can seem an abstract concept to us. After all, we don’t perform ritual animal sacrifices like the ancient Israelites. But we do offer personal and spiritual sacrifices. To make this more concrete, think about someone who has sacrificed of themselves for you. Perhaps it was a parent who still made time to spend with us after a long day at work. Perhaps it was a teacher who put in the extra effort to help us understand a lesson. We can think, also, of husbands and wives who take care of a sick spouse, despite the emotional toll it takes on them. We can think of soldiers who fought and died or who returned home scarred in body or spirit, who served to protect our liberties. There are the police officers who work an often thankless job to protect and serve, the medical professional who volunteers to work extra shifts during the pandemic, the firefighter battling wildfires in California, and the emergency responders rushing to help hurricane victims on the Gulf Coast. The list is endless. If we want to know what sacrifice looks like, let’s consider those people. If possible, take time to thank them or pray for them.

All this talk about sacrifice can be off-putting. We want to be Christians and follow Jesus so that our lives can be peaceful and joyful. Yet again and again, obeying God and following Jesus requires sacrifice. It can feel like too much to bear sometimes. I just can’t go on giving of myself, sacrificing my time and energy for others. Maybe we feel like giving up. The prophet Jeremiah felt that way. God had asked Jeremiah to preach His Word to the Israelites, but people respond by laughing at him and hating him. Jeremiah tells God that he can’t bear to continue. But then he realizes that God’s Word is

like a fire inside that he can't hold in. It bursts forth and he continues to speak God's Word.

In our second reading today, Paul writes to the Romans, urging them (and us): "offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship." How do we do this? Paul tells us that it is by not conforming ourselves to the world, by not going along with the flow of the crowd, but rather by listening attentively to God and obeying His Word. Sacrifices are painful; they always cost us something. But we have to spend our lives somehow. We can spend our lives for our own selfish aims, trying to gain the world, but losing our souls in the process; or we can spend our lives for God, offering up all our efforts to Him, in Whom we will discover the realization of all our deepest longings. It is a paradox, which Jesus teaches us, that "whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Jesus will keep it."

Jesus teaches this truth by His own personal example, laying His life down for us on the cross. As we just heard in today's Gospel reading, Peter doesn't like it when Jesus tells them that He will have to suffer and die. Perhaps Peter doesn't want his friend to have to suffer. Perhaps he cannot conceive of a Messiah Who, instead of winning a mighty victory over the Romans, is sentenced to a cruel death. Perhaps Peter knows deep down that if Jesus will suffer like that, then he can expect no better for himself. He shrinks from this realization in fear. Peter stops Jesus, telling Him that He must be wrong, but Jesus rebukes Peter strongly.

Jesus teaches us, His disciples, that we will all have to take up our crosses, to accept the sacrifices that we will be called to make every day. If we are growing weary of the sacrifices we have to make for God or our families, let us remember that it is Jesus Who first carried the cross for us. He doesn't say, "Go, carry your cross." He says, "Take up your cross and follow Me." When we make the sacrifices that life throws at us, we are walking in the footsteps of Jesus, and He also walks at our side, helping us to carry our crosses. And if we keep our eyes fixed on Him and we offer our smaller sacrifices up in union with Jesus' perfect sacrifice on the cross, then we will be able to return here to Mass and place those sacrifices on the altar, confident that He has made our sacrifices acceptable and pleasing in the sight of our Heavenly Father.