

THE THREE PILLARS OF LENT, PART FOUR: ALMSGIVING, ACTS OF CHARITY & MERCY

In this final reflection on the three pillars of Lent given to us by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, we come to the third pillar, that is almsgiving or acts of charity. We shall also see how closely this pillar is connected with the works of mercy, especially in how we might give alms (both in our disposition and what we do). In some respects, almsgiving is the most “outward” of the three pillars, for it involves action and concern for others. As we explore this pillar, we first need to keep in mind a number of crucial points, so as to ensure that our almsgiving or acts of charity have a good foundation and heart. We can do this by recalling *why* we give alms and then *how* we might best do this.

First of all, we must grasp a crucial fact: almsgiving and acts of charity are essential. They are not an option. As he so often does, St. John Chrysostom puts things bluntly: “it is impossible, though we perform ten thousand other good deeds, to enter the portals of the Kingdom without almsgiving.” There are many reasons for this, but our Lord himself gives us a fundamental reason in his teaching about the Final Judgment in Matthew’s Gospel (Matthew 25: 31-46). Notice the surprise of both those who did, and those who did not, help those in need: “Lord, when did we see you...?” The difference is that the virtuous, those who came to the aid of those in need, acted upon that need. In doing so, they came to the aid of both a brother or sister in Christ and therefore to Jesus himself: “whatever you did for one of the least *brothers of mine*, you did *for me*.”

Secondly, almsgiving is not some sort of grudging duty, or a guilty response to someone in need. It is rather something that must be a core part of us as disciples of the Lord, and therefore a way in which we truly try to imitate him. As Pope Benedict XVI noted: “Almsgiving according to the Gospel, is not mere philanthropy; rather it is a concrete expression of charity, a theological virtue that demands interior conversion to love of God and neighbor, in imitation of Jesus Christ, who, dying on the cross, gave his entire self to us.”

Thirdly, the Scriptures provide a further wonderful, if startling, reason and motivation for almsgiving and acts of charity. These actions remind us that all we have or are is actually a gift from God: we are only stewards, not owners, of everything, including our very life. Almsgiving is a perfect antidote to a sense of entitlement, or to a consumer mindset, that is so much part of our culture. It also helps us to grasp a key fact: we cannot say “it is my body, or my life”, for, in many ways they are not. What is more, because of this fact, we can understand almsgiving and acts of charity as paying back a debt, or even giving a loan, to God! We read this in the Book of Proverbs (Prov. 19: 17): “whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord and will be repaid in full.” This is why St. Ambrose states: “The rich man who gives to the poor does not bestow alms, but rather pays back a debt.” Finally, and as Jesus tells us, this is how we do indeed store up treasure in heaven (Luke 12: 33-34).

Almsgiving and acts of charity are also powerful signs that we truly trust in God. This is brought into sharp relief in the Gospel about the poor widow in the Temple (Luke 21: 1-4). A poor widow

enters and gives all that she has as an offering. It is easy to miss a small, but important detail about how and why she gave her last few coins. The word used in the original language of the Gospel referring to her giving is *bion*, from which come words such as biology or biosphere. So, she literally gives her whole world or existence. Not surprisingly, Jesus praises her giving, her generosity and her incredible act of faith and trust. We too are called to be generous in our giving, for in this we too can show our trust in God

Of course, Jesus gives us the perfect example of this “giving in trust.” In fact, we might say that he is the absolute embodiment of giving and trust. The holy days of Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday show us this so profoundly and clearly. At the Last Supper, Jesus takes on the task of the lowliest servant, as he washes the feet of his disciples (John 13: 1-15). It is a total expression of love and of self-giving for others: the ultimate almsgiving or act of charity! As Pope Benedict wrote in his book, *Journey to Easter*:

“The action of the washing of feet becomes for John the representation of what Jesus’ whole life is: his rising from the table setting aside his garment of glory, bending down to us in the mystery of forgiveness, the service of his human life and death. The life and death of Jesus do not stand one alongside the other: the death of Jesus only goes to show the substance, the real content, of his life.”

This year, if we are at the Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper and as we see the ‘washing of the feet’ (or *mandatum*) unfold before us, let us remember this supreme act of charity. Let us also recall that it is indeed a “mandatum”; that is a command and a mandate, given by the Lord to each one of us. In this we can call to mind Jesus’s answer to the question “who is my neighbor?” in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37) and his final words once he has answered the question: “go and do likewise.”

How then can we give alms or make daily acts of charity? Well, we can certainly be generous in giving of our time, treasure and talent; remembering, of course, that we are not really “giving”, but rather “returning” or “repaying.” However, there are so many ways and so many needs, that it can seem so daunting, or even overwhelming. We may not even know what to do or where to begin. As Saint Teresa of Kolkata often observed, “there is an ocean of need.” A very helpful template or check list for how we can give alms, or make daily acts of charity, is provided by what are known as the *works of mercy*. In fact, it is good to recall that the words for almsgiving and for mercy in the New Testament come from the same root: “eleēmōn.”

“Mercy is the showpiece of the soul” St. Augustine reminds us, because it is both a spiritual attitude or disposition and it is something practical and involves action. So, *how* can we be merciful; that is, how can we give alms or make those acts of charity? In our Christian tradition there are two main ways that we can do this: what are called the *corporal* and the *spiritual* works of mercy (they are based on the Final Judgment in Chapter 25 of St. Mathew’s Gospel, that we encountered earlier in this reflection). The corporal works of mercy are: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, ransoming captives (think of human trafficking for example) and burying the dead. The spiritual works of mercy are: instructing the ignorant, counseling the doubtful, comforting the sorrowful, admonishing the sinner, gladly

forgiving injuries, bearing wrongs patiently and praying for living and the dead. A pretty comprehensive (and challenging) list! Perhaps, during this season of Lent, we could take one of those works of mercy each day and try to live it and practice it. In this way, we will be both active and proactive in our almsgiving and acts of charity.

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