

Lenten Reflection 2011

**Go and learn the meaning of the words,
'I desire mercy not sacrifice.'**

Matt 9:13

GATHERING PRAYER [Clergy or, if no clergy is present, the group facilitator leads the participants into this Lenten observance with this prayer]:

Prayer for God's Mercy and Fidelity

Father, infinitely merciful and ever-faithful,
you formed us in your own image and likeness.
Though we forgot your goodness and sinned against you,
you saved us by the blood of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.
We implore you, God of mercy and love,
forgive us, heal us, strengthen us, and transform us.
Help us to be merciful and faithful,
as you are merciful and faithful.

Lord Jesus, you desire mercy not sacrifice.
During this Lenten Season and always,
accept our penance, prayer and fasting;
accept our almsgiving and other works of mercy.
Join them to your Passion by the grace of your Holy Spirit,
so that having transformed and united us in your Perfect Sacrifice,
we may faithfully continue your work of salvation of the world,
with the help of our Blessed Mother, Mary – all for the glory of your name. Amen.

GETTING FOCUSED: [At the beginning of each session, the facilitator reads slowly the following passage from the Gospel of Matthew. Participants are allowed a few minutes to reflect on its meaning and to probe the heart. They then answer privately the questions that follow. Participants are free to share relevant insights and the facilitator leads the discussion.]

GOSPEL OF MATTHEW (all stand)

A reading from the Holy Gospel according to Matthew

9:9-13

⁹ As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the customs post. He said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. ¹⁰ While he was at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹ The Pharisees saw this and said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹² He heard this and said, "Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. ¹³ Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' I did not come to call the righteous but sinners."

The Gospel of the Lord

(all sit)

REFLECTION:

“Go and learn the meaning of the words, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ I did not come to call the righteous but sinners.” (Matt 9:14)

[The facilitator initiates and encourages group discussion with the following questions]

In Matthew’s Gospel (this verse and v. 12:7), the word “mercy” – that Jesus desires – is translated in other versions of the Bible as “love,” “faithful love,” “steadfast love,” and “loyalty.” Still another word might be “fidelity.”

Matthew has brought forward an Old Testament utterance of God made through the Prophet Hosea (6:6), “For it is love that I desire, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than holocausts.” Earlier still was the exhortation of 1 Samuel 15:22, “Obedience is better than sacrifice and submission than the fat of rams.”

- † What does making a sacrifice mean? What does it mean to be merciful? How are they similar? How are they different?
- † If mercy is a kindness greater than might be expected, where in your life has God granted you mercy? Where in your life is God calling you to give that same mercy?
- † If sacrifice means to give up or destroy one for the sake of another, why would God desire mercy in the place of sacrifice?

[Questions for deeper reflection]

The sacrifice or holocausts referenced in each of these verses involved the immolation (destruction) of animals by the Temple priest – at times made for the atonement of sins. St. Paul tells us that: “It is impossible that with the blood of oxen and goats sin should be taken away.” (Hebrews 10:4) Here, in Matt 9:14, Jesus – by divine authority – overturns that practice preferring instead deeds of loving-kindness, mercy, and fidelity as a means of attaining forgiveness of sins.

- † Christ the High Priest offered himself as the most perfect sacrifice that could be offered to God for the atonement of sins. In this way, he gives himself totally to us. How does Christ the High Priest offer this same sacrifice today?
- † If we the Baptized are one single body in Christ – a communion in Christ – then how are we and all we have to offer somehow made one with Christ who is the perfect sacrifice of the Alter?
- † If we are members of the Body of Christ, can we then participate in the Paschal Mystery – in his Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension into heaven – in his work of salvation? How might we do this?
- † In what way are indulgences a “participation and sharing in the great work of Christ”?

A QUOTATION from: *Indulgences, Reservoir of Grace*

“Indulgences are our participation and sharing in the great works of Christ and those saints who have responded already in their lives to this grace and contributed to the reservoir of merits. We share in their merits.” (introduction)

“An indulgence is the remission of temporal punishment due to sin already forgiven. Indulgences cannot be bought or sold. They are a free gift from God to us. (1)

“Indulgences help a Christian to grow in holiness, perform works of charity and mercy; collaborate with Christ in the salvation of oneself and of the faithful departed; to share and contribute to the reservoir of grace in Christ.” (2)

† An indulgence, being a free gift from God, is an example of God’s mercy toward us. Ask yourself, “Am I willing to accept this gift of mercy and extend the same gift of mercy to the holy souls in purgatory?”

† The Church teaches that neither providing for our families nor any other business in the secular world should be thought to be outside the scope of our spiritual life. (AA, 4) Does this mean that even the most routine activities that make up our daily life can be made an offering to God?

† If so, then do you think we might receive indulgences if we raise our minds to God in humble trust as we prayerfully go about our daily duties and patiently bear the hardships of life? Does this, with God’s grace, help the person who seeks to purify himself/herself of sin and become holy?

[One (or different participants) reads each of the following OT, NT and Gospel texts slowly for all to hear and between each reading, allows a moment of quiet to reflect on its meaning and to probe the heart.]

OLD TESTAMENT READING: Ezekiel 37:12-14
(I shall put my spirit in you and you shall live.)

NEW TESTAMENT READING: Romans 8:8-11
(If the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you then he will give life to your own mortal bodies.)

GOSPEL: (all stand) John 11:1-45
(I am the resurrection and the life.)

LENTEN REFLECTION - Bishop Alvaro Corrada, S.J.:

[The facilitator broadcasts the audio-video presentation by Most Reverend Alvaro Corrada, S.J., Bishop of Tyler, speaking on the topic of: God’s Mercy and Fidelity]

“There is something about faith and about mercy. Mercy is such a tender experience. The heart and the mind of the human person can be merciful and faithful one minute and in the next minute turn into the hardness of the rock and the fear of those who are cowards. The Lord Jesus calls us into mercy.”

- † Ask yourself, “Do I allow myself to experience God’s mercy? Where am I most likely to have the tender experience of God’s mercy? Is my heart fearful? Has my heart hardened?”
- † How are penance, prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and works of mercy the remedy for a fearful heart; a hardened heart?
- † In what circumstances of my life am I or am I not extending God’s mercy to myself or to others?
- † How can I be more merciful to myself? To others?
- † Would the attainment of indulgences help me to be more merciful to myself? To others?

“There is a Christian experience... of faith unique to Christians; it is to be in Christ; it is to enter into this personal relationship that is a dialogue for life... a commitment that goes beyond sacrifice; goes into generosity; into an acceptance of God as God, letting him be God and accepting my freedom to be myself and to be the person God wants me to be because he turns my life from death into life, from darkness into the life of the Spirit.”

- † Can “freedom to be myself” and “freedom to be the person God wants me to be” ever be in conflict or opposition? Explain your position.
- † How – especially during Lent – do the penitential practices of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and works of mercy bring us more fully into the Christian experience?

“The experience of the resurrection is the experience of the Eucharist.”

- † What do you think Bishop Corrada means when he says, “The experience of the resurrection is the experience of the Eucharist”?

CONCLUSION: As we go our separate ways and until we come back together again, let each of us continue to ask what Jesus means when he says: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

CLOSING PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, from the depths of my heart
I call to you; Lord, hear my cry.
Lord Jesus, give me grace to be faithful as you are always faithful.
Give me grace to be your mercy in the world.
Let me bring your light and love
wherever there is sin, division, sickness, or death.
Most Holy Spirit, help me draw near to those who need you most.
Lord, give life to my bones! Amen!